



2017

Empire

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Recommended Citation

Lima, Lazaro, "Empire." In *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, by Vargas, Deborah, Nancy R. Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, 55-58. New York: New York University Press, 2017.

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It is a commonplace in American studies to consider the nation's founders as progenitors of the conception of the United States as an "exceptional" empire such that Thomas Paine's oft-cited aphorism "We have it in our power to begin the world all over again" begets Thomas Jefferson's call for an "Empire of Liberty," which, in turn, would spread freedom across the globe in the name of the equally pithy and consecrated Declaration of Independence's "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." What then is particular and theoretically constitutive of the keyword "empire" for the field of Latina/o studies? "Empire" is the keyword that frames both the field of Latina/o studies and what Latina/o studies projects interrogate in order to make visible how empire's scattered remains throughout the Americas cross national borders as well as affective states of being. In so doing, Latina/o studies' methodological recourse to and critique of empire seeks to apprehend empire's legacies beyond the singular historical actor model of the exceptional nation-state in order to engage how empire saturates and conditions affects across space, time, and bodies. This is particularly significant when we consider that Latinas/os are the nation's largest "minority" at over 55 million strong yet the most underrepresented in national institutions, circuits of power, and political blocks. Yet despite this daunting demographic reality, the absence of Latinas/os from circuits of power largely render this expansive demographic of multitudes of variegated *latinidades*

invisible. As Kirsten Silva Gruesz (2003, 56) succinctly diagnosed the vagaries of the Latina/o question, "as Marx said of capital, Latinos seem to be everywhere and nowhere at once." What are the mechanisms that both delimit Latina/o political emergence and sustain Latina/o invisibility despite the demographic evidence to the contrary?

Latina/o studies' critique of empire insists on making this multitude historically manifest as well as laying bare the imperial logics that occlude historical cause and effect relations: there is no Latina/o migration or immigration to the United States that was not first occasioned by either U.S. intervention throughout the Americas or as a result of U.S. corporate interventions into nationally or culturally sovereign states (as is the case with Puerto Rico). If Latinas/os are cast as interlopers feeding on the national body politic's ever-shrinking largesse, then Latina/o studies' relation to empire provides the scaffolding to examine and explicate empire's historical erasures. As Fredric Jameson puts it, "history is what hurts" (1981, 102), but it hurts Latinas/os disproportionately, and beyond corporal abjection and death. That "hurt"—what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) once called the "1,950 mile-long open wound"—bleeds into the realm of epistemological impossibility: Latina/o knowledge projects that attempt to document the Latina/o experience are as susceptible to the same crisis of legitimation in the academy as Latina/o bodies are in the political sphere. Countering such imperial violence requires theoretical and methodological acuity, which can archive and render visible how and why Latinas/os did not come as immigrants or migrants to the United States, but rather "the United States came to them in the form of colonial enterprises" (Stavans 2011, iiiii). More than a decolonial gesture, such a reframing of imperial logics is an epistemological investment that seeks to reap the dividends of Latina/o futures through the

agencies of a nimble Latina/o studies project that unsettles empire's founding conceits premised on freedom. Such a project insists on untangling Jefferson's "Empire of Liberty" from the imperial mechanisms that delimit freedoms and cast liberty's others as literally and figuratively invisible. The promise of economic freedom, freedom from unjust harm, and the freedom to achieve affective states of fulfillment are counterfactuals in the face of the brutal and illegitimate appropriation of space, time, and bodies that inveigh against democratic egalitarianism's promise. It is in this sense that Latina/o studies' engagement with empire seeks an accounting that would make visible how and why "the gift of freedom" is empire's principle calumny—the impossible promise that, beyond redress, requires the necessary correctives to set past "odious debts" afire through historical visibility and the theoretical armor to guard against those future "deaths to come" (Nguyen 2012, xii).

The liberal left conception of empire was radically altered in the field of American studies after the publication of Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease's *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993). Kaplan and Pease's major contribution resided in their collection's methodological and theoretical rejection of the intellectual strictures of the disciplinarily bound field of "diplomatic history" and its well-known founding insistence in understanding the "age of empire" as neatly and temporally bookmarked between 1898 and 1917 and, to stress the obvious, ensconced in the past. Kaplan and Pease's volume conceived of empire largely as a process of critique requiring the interrogation of how U.S. capital incursions, or "Pecunia Americana," motivated imperial interventions in the Américas and the world with the concomitant but ever elusive promise of freedom held in abeyance from freedom's always future colonial subjects. However, perhaps it was Antonio Benítez Rojo

(1931–2005) in his influential *La isla que se repite: El Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna* (1989), translated in 1996 as *The Repeating Island*, who most cogently anticipated what we might consider a critique of empire from the vantage point of the global South. Following Colombian historian Germán Arciniegas (1900–1999) and his monumental study, *La biografía del Caribe* ([1945] 1966; translated as *Caribbean, Sea of the New World* [1946]), Benítez Rojo succinctly summarized the inter-American origins of empires' logics beyond the historical strictures of the modern nation-state when he centered the critique of empire on "Pecunia Americana"—that is, on a critique of capital and how liberty's others have become exchangeable commodities under capital. Benítez Rojo makes the connection between world-systems theory and capital critiques from the epistemic anchor of the global South when he writes, "The Atlantic is today the Atlantic (NATO, World Bank, New York Stock Exchange, European Economic Community, etc.) because it was the painfully conceived child of the Caribbean. . . . It is possible to defend successfully the hypothesis that without deliveries from the Caribbean womb Western capital accumulation would not have been sufficient to effect a move . . . from the so-called Mercantilist Revolution to the Industrial Revolution" (1996, 5). The "American" legacies of this Atlantic and inter-American history of empire's circum-Caribbean emergence condition the field of Latina/o studies' relation to and critiques of empire from the vantage point of a "Latina/o studies of the global South" model of capital economic and historical critique. It is in this sense that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri could be said to elaborate—however unwittingly—Benítez Rojo's critique of capital in their book *Empire* (2000) vis-à-vis what I am calling "Pecunia Americana" in my critical short-hand.

Hardt and Negri argue in *Empire* that we live in a U.S.-dominated imperial world order wherein the

nation-state has so lost its geographically determined specificity that temporal and spatial limits of domination are enacted across space and time through the agencies of capital. Where Negri and Hardt recenter the United States as the locus of critical sense-making for a critique of the “empire of liberty,” Benítez Rojo’s intervention has the advantage of naming, not the most recent iteration of empire’s manifestation, but the origin of a structured world-system that has historically achieved military, economic, and psychic domination through racialization and by attempting to convince the colonized that they have been colonized for their own good. Both reconstituting and extending the disciplinary blinders of diplomatic history’s bookmarks for empire (1898 and 1917), the emerging field paradigm of Latina/o studies of the global South insists on an accounting capable of moving beyond the historical and interpretive blinders of Jefferson’s “Empire of Liberty.”

It is to this end that scholars in ethnic studies, American studies, and Latina/o studies have extended Michael Paul Rogin’s (1983) coinage of the term “the American 1848” in order to map the emergence of post-industrial racialization as the precondition for denying freedom to liberty’s others: Amerindians, blacks, Asians and Southeast Asian Americans, and Latinas/os as the racialized confluence of these “legally” and socially disenfranchised others. For Rogin, the Mexican American War (1846–1848), along with “the eruption and apparent pacification of the slavery crisis, between 1846 and 1851, defines the American 1848” and anticipates the Civil War (1983, 103). In pursuing his analysis, Rogin elaborates what Marx termed the “beautiful revolution,” the French Revolution of 1848, in order to distinguish it from its Mexico-U.S. analogue in 1848. While the French Revolution had social inequality as its principal object for correction, the latter was ultimately about establishing racial inequality as the structural

precondition for the post-industrial incarnation of the empire of liberty as Arciniegas and Benítez-Rojo would have understood it. As I have summarized elsewhere, it is under these conditions that the epistemologically violent appropriation of territories and bodies emerge so that, for example, the national signifier “Mexican” can be appropriated as a term of racial identification and as a synonym for racialized blackness after the American 1848 (Lima 2007).

Methodologically speaking, Latina/o studies of the global South’s critique of empire necessarily reframes familiar *grand récits* in order to defamiliarize their naturalization as givens guarded against epistemological reflection and critique. While the familiar narrative arc of the Monroe Doctrine (1823), for example, had it that any efforts by European nations to interfere in the Americas would be met by U.S. military aggression, it ignores generative Latina/o studies work that goes against the grain of such historical amnesias. Raúl Coronado’s *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture* (2013) reminds us that the Monroe Doctrine was ultimately the co-creation of U.S. diplomats as well as of radical republican Latin American agents who wished to oust Spain from both Cuba and Puerto Rico after the French Restoration’s invasion of liberal Spain in 1823. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has reminded us, “For every fictional Berrian ready to liberate Mexico and create empire, there was a nonfictional Latino Lafayette helping Philadelphia and Washington find their republican selves” (2016, 200).

Such key reframings of historical master narratives—from the American 1848’s prehistory vis-à-vis the Monroe Doctrine, to the U.S.-Mexico War of 1848—characterize Latina/o studies’ investments in critiques of empire above and against American studies’ field critique of empire. Beyond diplomatic history’s bookends of 1898 and 1917, the Spanish American War

(1898) is understood not as a U.S imperial exception that ends in 1917, but rather as a continuation of Arciniegas' and Benítez-Rojo's structural reframing, which privileges not state actors but Pecunia Americana's evacuation of cause-effect relations and its corresponding historical amnesias. It is in this sense that the Foraker Act of 1900, which made Puerto Rico a protectorate of the United States, begets the truncated citizenship imposed on Puerto Ricans in 1917 through the Jones Act after the U.S. colonization of the island in 1898.

Read from this generative framing proposed by a Latina/o studies of the global South and its critique of empire, the gift of freedom can no longer be understood through Jefferson's "Empire of Liberty" as a deferred promise for Pecunia Americana's others but rather as empire's principal epistemological trap from which critiques of empire can emerge to fortify democratic practice rather than delimiting it through historical amnesias. Such an investment in methodological anchors from the vantage point of the global South have the potential to revise what stories count beyond their conditions of reception and the vicissitudes of historical archiving in order to safeguard deaths to come as well as the odious debts that must be rescinded on ethical grounds. The prehistories of empire's occluded remains, its temporal present, as well as its related futures, are Latina/o studies' signal contribution to the reframing of single-actor model understandings of empire. In the process, Latina/o studies of the global South's reframing of empire foregrounds a capacious method that can account for the historical, affective, and corporeal hauntings of empire's remains.