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María de Guzmán. Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend, Off-Whiteness, and Anglo-American Empire

José F. Buscaglia-Salgado
SUNY at Buffalo

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Keywords / Palabras clave

Spain, Black Legend, Leyenda negra, Anglo-American Empire

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María de Guzmán.
Spain's Long Shadow: The Black Legend,
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Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 372 pp.

José F. Buscaglia/ State University of New York at Buffalo

María DeGuzmán's ambitious book studies the role played by what she calls "figures of Spain" in the construction of "Anglo-American" identity. Looking into the production of culture as ideology DeGuzmán sets out to reveal the scaffolding that supports the myths of the Usonian nation and empire by looking at "Anglo-American" ideology under the lense of ethnic, critical race, queer, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial critiques. She understands figures of Spain in the widest possible terms to include historical and literary characters, images and iconography, and rhetorical devices of every sort. Her main thesis is that "in relation to Anglo-American culture. Spain functions as a virtual or mirror image, in front of which, in a libidinal dynamic of identification and disavowal, Anglo –American culture, despite its fragmentation and initial fragility, ascends towards a seemingly unified and coherent imperial

identity.” (xvii) This psychoanalytic approach is framed by a continuous movement between Spain as “reassuring ideal” and as “fearful alter ego”, an operation that tends to result in the positioning of the “Anglo-American” empire in a far and detached place from the evils and excesses of European imperial traditions and terror. DeGuzmán traces this movement from the earliest projects of the young republic to the latest stages of the Usonian empire, paying particular attention to the War of 1898 fought against Spain and over Cuba.

Chapter 1, “The Shadow of the Black Legend” focuses on Gothic “American” fiction to uncover the ways in which the figures of Spain were darkened and racialized, beyond the moral and political critique framed in the Black Legend, in order to contrast these to the “whiteness” and moral superiority of the “Anglo-American” subject. Chapter 2, “Imperial Visions: Moor, Gypsy, and Indian”, traces the movement through which the racialized “darkness” already assigned to the figures of Spain became tied to the perceived dangers of “racial” mixture, impurity, and degeneration, playing on “Anglo-American” anxieties regarding miscegenation. Chapter 3, “Consolidating Anglo-American Imperial Identity around the Spanish-American War”, deals with the way that figures of Spain and Spaniards helped promote a reinvigorated sense of national identity, cutting across class and geographic divides and, in turn, clearing the way for a guiltless sense of imperial destiny built around the figure of the “Anglo-American” as the superior civilizer, the one whose mission was devoid of all self-interest and absolved from any guilt. Chapter 4, “Sacred Bulls of Modernism”, looks at the work of Usonian expatriates who during the first half of the 20th Century came to look upon Spain as the last frontier and at Spaniards as primal and authentic people, thereby approaching Spanishness for its therapeutic qualities in the midst of a process of ideological questioning and self-doubting. Chapter 5, “(Post) Modern Denaturalizations of Nationality”, tries to describe the line that separates “Spanish” and “American” in current racial debates and ideological positioning in Usonian discourse, while chapter 6, “Afterlives of Empires”, is a sort of manifesto of *Latinidad*.

The book is an important contribution as far as it identifies a corpus of works and ideological constructs that heretofore had not been brought together into a full discussion of the way in which Usonian imperialism grew at the expense of its vision of and engagement with the imperial legacy of Spain in the New World. Yet, De Guzmán fails to link in a

convincing way the different trends, attitudes and periods she identifies and there is no cohesive argument demonstrating the progression of “figures of Spain” into a deep-seated ideological component of Usonian thought and discourse.

The reading of Charles Brockden's Wieland in the first chapter is quite promising. Yet, it seems to stay at a purely epidermic level. Similarly, DeGuzmán's critique of Poe tends to depend rather heavily on a psychoanalytic critique in the face of strong and plausible connections to the Black Legend which are either lacking in the original text or not fully explored by the critic. Particularly disappointing is the presentation of Melville's Benito Cereno, a text that is so wonderfully rich and appropriately relevant to this discussion. De Guzmán's reading barely goes beyond pointing out the obvious differences between a binary and a three-tiered system of socioracial categorization.

The discussion of the ambiguity felt towards Spain, and of the role figures of Spain played in the production of the United States as the self-conceived anti-empire, is enhanced by the introduction of pictorial works by Emanuel Leutze and Sargent. Yet, this discussion is also tainted by the idealized notions of Spain held by the author, which tend to lean towards a rather anti-heroic identification with the traditional “outcasts” of Spain (Moors, Gypsies, Jews) and to promote idealization of entire periods in Spanish history under the banner of “convivencia.” Moreover, the queer critique of Sargent's work is done against a diffuse background that fails to account for the nuances of Andalusian musical cultures and the complexity and gravity of bullfighting traditions. How much could this purported misreading of Spain be attributed to the same ideological excess that De Guzmán denounces in “Anglo-American” ideology and to the deep-rooted scars that such a discourse has left in the Usonian—and in its “Latina/o-American”—imaginary?

Chapter 3 is perhaps the best and most compelling part of the book. Certainly it draws upon a wide repertoire of images and figures of Spain and it is a good attempt at pinpointing how it was that the United States came to position itself as the depository of Spanish imperial legacy while absolving itself from any and all sins as a conquering power in the tradition of European rapacity. The definitive book on this subject is still to be written. Yet, De Guzmán's contribution is a step in the right direction. At some point, future scholars in this

area will need to focus also on the role played by Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the construction and propagation of the myth and realities of Spanish barbarity and despotism, and on their complicity in the construction of the myth and allegories of “America” and “Columbia” as protectors and redeemers of “lesser peoples” in the name of Liberty.

The fourth chapter also sheds light on possible routes for further inquiry, especially as it pertains to scopic regimes and patterns of travel and consumption that have become dominant modalities among Usonian “tourists.” As De Guzmán rightly argues, once Spain had been perceived as vanquished and more precisely between the early 1920’s and late 1950’s, Usonian modernist writers came to see the country as “a last frontier, a land to be discovered.” (188) In that way, Spain and her peoples came to occupy a primary site “in modernists’ contradictory quest to be moderns.”(190) No doubt this way of travel has become enshrined in the era of mass tourism at the height of the Usonian empire and it is particularly felt in the way in which middle-class Usonians come to reminisce about Hemingway’s Cuba and in the way they approach the peoples in “less fortunate” parts of the World, especially in the “Spanish” Caribbean, when they “go abroad.” Yet, I question whether such modalities, as identified by De Guzmán in Stein and Hemingway, are not more directly traceable to the practice of English piracy in the Spanish Main which, together with De Guzmán’s “Shadow of Spain”, is the other and perhaps the darkest —and still to be named and uncovered—major point of support for Usonian imperial ideology and praxis.

I find DeGuzmán’s discussion of Richard Wright’s Pagan Spain to be particularly revealing, evidencing the contradictions and the traps embodied in the person and the experience of this “Anglo-Afro-American” who lived and loved Spain during the most devastating years of the Franco dictatorship. More should have been said in this case about the hold and the complicity in the production of ideology. Unfortunately, De Guzmán sees a much more Manichaeian relationship: “Although written by an African American, the text functions for the most part as an expatriation of Anglo-American Gothic, a tool of Anglo-American imperial ideology, and precludes the emergence of its writer’s hyphenated subjectivity from beneath the long shadow cast by that very ideology.” (232-3)

This last quote, in all its problematic set of enunciations, could stand as a summary of the problems produced by the logic behind the book's argument, problems that come to the forefront in the fifth and sixth chapters as the critic tries to pronounce sentence on Usonian imperialism from the vantage point of her own "hyphenated subjectivity." Again, there is a certain lack of competence on the part of the critic when it comes to addressing the complexities of contemporary Spanish realities. The sixth chapter sadly devolves into a sort of manifesto of Latinidad, anchored to the figure of García Lorca in a celebratory discourse of queerness and of something like the "Judeo-Gypsy soul." The chapter concludes with a facile denunciation of the Aznar-Blair-Bush axis as constituted in the meeting of the three leaders in the Azores on March 16, 2003.

All in all, the book is a self fulfilled prophecy. As it sets out to posit "Anglo-American" identity as an ethnicity, it ends up reinforcing the racial categorizations that sustain and secure "Anglo-American" dominance as a "divine" cast above all others in Usonian ideology and ethnocentric practices. As De Guzmán aptly shows in various moments in the text, who is to say that heralding as she does the "postcolonial prospects of Latinidad" is not simply yet another way of reaffirming the supremacy of Usonian ideology by accepting its basic premises, conforming to its modus operandi, and restoring its constitutive advantage vis a vis Spain and "Spanishness." That, in turn, should be an appropriate question to ask those who think themselves at the vanguard of Latina/o studies and of other such popular modalities of "ethnic-based" inquiry into the Long Shadow of the United States of America.