

LABYRINTHS OF CRITIQUE
THE PROMISE OF ANTHROHISTORY

PART I

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**Part I. Labyrinths of Critique:
The Promise of Anthrohistory**

Introduction **DAVID PEDERSEN**

■ During the winter of 2008, Fernando Coronil composed “Pieces for Anthrohistory: A Puzzle to Be Assembled Together.” He circulated many drafts to friends, completing it for publication in the 2011 edited book *AnthroHistory: Unsettling Knowledge, Questioning Discipline*.¹ The essay appeared as the culmination of twenty-two chapters in that collection (see the introduction). It stands here as the opening one in this volume. Like other famous theses that go to eleven or eighteen, though not ninety-five, Coronil’s theses may be appreciated for their poetic and aphoristic rendering of a resolutely practical orientation and project. He names this heartfelt venture “anthrohistory,” acknowledging in the first footnote to the essay that it, “as Juliette’s Romeo or Quijote’s Dulcinea . . . [,] is an idealized hyper-real subject.” Coronil reflects more on this comparison: “Perhaps love holds not just an ideal reality, but the impetus to make it real. As in any romance, readers can treat ‘anthrohistory’ in this text as a space-holder for a love of their own” (306).

“Pieces for Anthrohistory” (hereafter, “Pieces”) offers a passionate base note for understanding Fernando’s life work. We borrow the first sentence of Thesis Eight for this book’s title: “The struggle for life is the matter.” This is the object and purpose at the center of “Pieces.” The essay helps explain Fernando’s abiding interest in Cuba; his studies of the Venezuelan state; his defiance of colonial and imperial relations; and the manner of critical knowledge production that he honed as a Venezuelan-born, U.S. university-based professor in the academic disciplines of anthropology and history. As a practical orientation, “Pieces” defines all at once a unique combination of inquiry, explanation, critique, and presentation. It has ethico-political and aesthetic implications and carries significant ontological and epistemological import.

In this prefatory essay, I draw out these propositions, especially the latter two, by considering some qualities of “Pieces” and linking them with several essays that preceded its publication and one that appeared after “Pieces,” which are included in this opening section of this book under the title “Labyrinths of Critique.”

The theses begin with a recognition of anthrohistory’s emergence both from within and in opposition to the dominant “history, premises, and politics of Western knowledge,” especially the two academic disciplines that make up its name. While keeping this in focus, Coronil figuratively pulls back and broadens the field of view to show anthrohistory as a fully planetary endeavor that emerges from and encompasses, but also goes beyond, the disciplinary-specific conditions of its formation: “Of this world, but not at home in it, anthrohistory resists being disciplined in existing institutions or contained by definitions.”² He concludes the third thesis with a programmatic statement that reiterates anthrohistory’s immanently critical stance: “Brushing history against the brain, its task is to examine what has been recorded and uncover what has been silenced, bringing to light possible histories.”

Coronil follows this opening sequence with eight subsequent theses that creatively explore in more detail what such a project entails, including what should be presupposed about the world—or worlds, as Coronil acknowledges in the second footnote—how best to inquire into these worlds, and inseparably, why, and to what ends.

Overall, the eleven theses contain multiple and extended footnotes that offer evidence and explicit recognition of the influences behind each of them. One can read “Pieces” lineally by thesis-number progression, appreciating its closed rhetorical logic, and in a more capacious way by following up each note, the notes’ references, and potentially beyond. Coronil alludes to this combined shape when he writes as a note to his “Notes,” “Imagine these notes as endnotes within notes, in counterpoint to each piece. They can be read as footnotes, or as beginning notes, all at once, or next to the eleven pieces—as side notes” (306).

This open and expansive modality, expressed with the footnote gesture, as well as the multiple references to Jorge Luis Borges’s literary explorations, and especially the playful exemplification in Thesis Seven, point out that Coronil presupposes something like an infinite continuum of relations in which the practice of anthrohistory unfolds. There is no temporal or spatial unit, no form, that cannot be further divided or placed within a yet more en-

compassing whole, including that whole itself. As he writes in Thesis Five, “Anthrohistory seeks to produce representations of the world as fragments of an unfolding totality, itself a fragment of other totalities. Any totality is partial” (303). This secular reverence for infinitude is a first ontological presupposition for anthrohistory.³

As the opening three theses illustrated through their simultaneous shift in point of view, level of focus, and overall framing, whatever something is in its fullest sense (such as anthrohistory) includes the composite of relations out of which it congealed, in which it develops, and that contribute to its capacities—and that it can react back on like an external entity. Coronil expresses this inherently dynamic and relational understanding of part and open whole, of form, content, and meaning, in Thesis Six, explaining that “points on a map make a point. Like lines in a play, they become meaningful by being joined to each other by the authors and publics who join them. These lines form not just texts about the world, but the texture of the world. They represent an external reality from within it” (303). This privileging of representational relations rather than discrete things is a second ontological stance with respect to anthrohistory’s worlds.

Given these premises—infinately open wholes composed of infinitely divisible parts of wholes—Coronil proposes a uniquely appropriate method of inquiry. He writes that anthrohistory is an “ensemble of practices for examining human practices through ever changing prisms” and takes “form as a never-ending puzzle whose pieces are crafted and pieced together by these practices” (302). I take this to mean that anthrohistory’s manner of inquiry entails using different optics capable of dispersing, deviating, displacing, or rotating what passes through them. This suggests a technique of inquiry predicated on moving about, varying the angles, positions and surfaces of the optics in order to look at, around, through, and beyond phenomena, bringing out various qualities and constitutive relations, like white light dispersed into a spectrum of visible and invisible electromagnetic radiation, at once particles and waves.

One effect of such inquiry is to show the partiality of any single perspective or angle and, in the process, produce more inclusive, multidimensional, even contradiction-laden accounts of whatever is under study, including the larger determinative whole of which it is a part. Coronil uses the example of maps to develop this epistemological implication and its inseparable political consequences. He begins Thesis Five with a quote from Adrienne Rich that he develops: “If a place on the map is also a place in history’ any representation simultaneously encloses time and space.” Coronil continues the

theme in Thesis Six, noting that the truth of maps “is measured by their exactitude as models of the world they image, but it is realized by the world they help create. The point of a map defines its points” (303).

As the essay’s opening epigraph from Borges and its reference to labyrinths encapsulates, “Pieces” presupposes an infinite continuum of relations and calls for multiplex inquiry into the appearance of borders, boundaries, and qualities of stasis. A sense of movement is entailed with finding and making connections that are otherwise difficult to immediately perceive. Metaphorically, the critical project that “Pieces” describes is much like moving through a labyrinth.

In his introduction to the Duke University Press edition of Fernando Ortiz’s *Cuban Counterpoint*, “Transculturation and the Politics of Theory: Countering the Center, Cuban Counterpoint,” Coronil inquires into the reciprocal interaction of Ortiz’s book with the larger and also highly uneven imperial conditions of its formation and circulation. In this way, it exemplifies aspects of the part-whole relationship explored in “Pieces.” For Fernando, the book was an example of engaged inquiry, at once public and scholarly, written from and with respect to a peripheral locus (Cuba) that was relationally connected, however unevenly, with dominant metropolitan centers that historically had imported Cuban tobacco and sugar and continued to house prominent academic disciplines (anthropology). Like Fernando’s own life and writings, it was a work that traversed multiple hierarchies and boundaries.⁴

Coronil emphasized that Ortiz developed the term “counterpoint” as a way to grasp the co-determination of opposites. Joined with this conceptualization, Ortiz then proposed “transculturation” as a way to describe the interaction of such opposing entities not as discrete and separate but, rather, as forming and changing in relation to the larger whole of which they both were an expression of and an influence on. Mirroring this approach, Coronil explores how particular features of Ortiz’s life and work were shaped by the larger wholes within which they developed. He concludes the essay following a similar logic, showing how Bronisław Malinowski’s appreciation for Ortiz and his perspective on anthropology more generally changed in relation to broader historical circumstances. In both instances, some qualities and aspects of each scholar’s works and perspectives were amplified while others were diminished. Coronil’s essay uncovered this process, much in the way that this kind of inquiry is outlined in “Pieces.”

Coronil's writings show him to be an inspired stickler for suitable titles and a creative wrangler of keywords. For Coronil, concepts really matter. Reality is not just conceptualized reality. It also is part of the concepts themselves. This is especially apparent in the preface that he contributed to the book *Close Encounters*, edited by Gilbert Joseph and Catherine LeGrand. Coronil's preface is a clever study of dominant categories and their adequacy. As with optics and maps in "Pieces," Coronil recognizes that terms such as "post-colonial," "political economy," "culture," and "materiality" express aspects or qualities of a larger open whole as much as separate and discrete objects. Following a thesis-like progression, Coronil reworks a series of categorical distinctions to show the shared content of the supposed oppositions, much in the way that Ortiz defined such reciprocal transformation as "transculturation." Coronil's goal is to bring together and transform a field of inquiry and, by extension, go as much as possible beyond it.

In his short essay that reflects on the controversy surrounding the publication of Patrick Tierney's book *Darkness in El Dorado*, Coronil again takes the approach of critically examining the emergence of a dominant formation or understanding and the ways that this process occludes much of the form's enabling conditions. By moving between parts and their larger but less visible wholes, Coronil discloses the structural inequalities masked by metropolitan perspectives and the ruse of a fact-value distinction that hides the political and ethical stakes of inquiry.

Coronil wrote "The Future in Question: History and Utopia in Latin America (1989–2010)" several years after "Pieces." The essay reflects Coronil's relational approach to part and whole and the task of disclosing what is concealed in dominant representations by multiply reworking these form-content relationships according to different viewpoints, levels of focus, and geohistorical frame, as outlined in "Pieces." He brings this perspective explicitly to temporal dimensions of life in Latin America, showing that past, present, and future each refer to aspects of the same, unfinished whole. By moving across this content, Coronil seeks to keep alive future possibilities as they are present in both the past and the present. Cast in terms of dreams, desires, and counterpoints, Cuban and otherwise, Coronil writes:

Of course, given the unequal structures of power within which this leftward turn has taken place, it is possible that its new imaginings may be co-opted or crushed. But given that these imaginaries now unite South and North in a politics that fuses the pursuit of well-being and sheer

global survival, it is likely that a counterpoint between the embers of the past and the poetry of the future will continue to conjure up images of worlds free from the horrors of history. Politics will remain a battle of desires waged on an uneven terrain. But as long as people find themselves without a safe and dignified home in the world, utopian dreams will continue to proliferate, energizing struggles to build a world made of many worlds, where people can dream their futures without fear of waking up.⁵

This is the poetic and political promise of Anthrohistory.

Notes

- 1 Fernando Coronil, "Pieces for Anthrohistory: A Puzzle to Be Assembled Together," in *AnthroHistory: Unsettling Knowledge, Questioning Discipline*, ed. Chandra Bhimull, David William Cohen, Fernando Coronil, Edward L. Murphy, Monica Patterson, and Julie Skurski, eds., 301–16 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press). Hereafter, page numbers are cited in parentheses in the text. The true breadth of Fernando's circulation of "Pieces" in its many iterations gradually became clear to me through conversations with people who attended a memorial celebration of his life in 2013, organized by Richard Turits, Coronil's friend and colleague in the Department of History at the University of Michigan.
- 2 From the habitual perspective of any single academic discipline, Coronil's audacious opening gesture may prompt a feeling of disorientation and falling, similar to the way that the "dolly zoom" achieved this effect in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.
- 3 During one conversation in the early 1990s, Fernando said that, in his experience, he had not found many contemporary scholars who really took infinity seriously, or even the impossibly large whole that would include all human social and cultural life on the planet, not limited to just its biological aspects, and include as well its future possibilities. To make the point, Fernando enjoyed naming earthly capitalism as no more than offensive flatulence in the larger cosmos and musing about the fantastic redemptive promise of a simultaneous orgasm among all capable species on the planet.
- 4 Coronil's friend and colleague at the University of Michigan, Rebecca Scott, teasingly referred to *Cuban Counterpoint's* author as "Fernando's Ortiz."
- 5 Fernando Coronil, "The Future in Question," this volume, 128–162.