BEYOND OCCIDENTALISM,
BEYOND EMPIRE

PART III

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Part III. Beyond Occidentalism, Beyond Empire

Introduction **PAUL EISS**

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■ The essays gathered here under the rubric "Beyond Occidentalism, Beyond Empire" were published over a period of a decade, from the mid-1990s through the early years of the 2000s. While they were deeply engaged with debates of the times of their original publication, taken individually and as a group the essays retain great currency, even urgency, for contemporary discussions of their central subjects. While originally composed as a response to Edward Said's discussion of Orientalism, for instance, Coronil's analysis of "Occidentalism" raises critical questions about the epistemological formation that he considered Orientalism's dark side. His discussion of the constructions of Western selfhood that underwrite Western representations of the otherness of subjected populations makes clear that such representations were and are intimately connected to global and asymmetrical relations of power and exploitation. In veiled form, such an epistemology remains characteristic of power relations, and associated forms of othering, under the contemporary neoliberal global order. In "Listening to the Subaltern," Coronil poses a timely rejoinder to Gayatri Spivak's now classic discussion of subaltern speech but also moves substantially beyond its terms. He expands the scope of the concept of subalternity to embrace representatives of neocolonial states as they endeavor to speak for, about, or to sovereign, collective entities, such as "the people." In "Smelling Like a Market," a critique of James Scott's 1998 treatise on authoritarian high modernism, Coronil signals some substantial limitations of a work that excluded market-based schemes of social intervention to focus only on policies of modernizing states. But more than that, he sketches the outlines of a more expansive study of the state that remains compelling, suggesting that static and scopic approaches to state

power be replaced by a dialogic, performative, and processual approach to representations of state and market.

The last two essays in part III provide trenchant contributions to discussions of postcolonialism and empire across multiple fields—fields whose regional and disciplinary boundaries Coronil constantly urges us to cross, or transgress. In "Latin American Postcolonial Studies and Global Decolonization," he calls attention to the problematic nature of "Latin American Postcolonial Studies" as an assumed rubric. Despite many shared subjects of critical concern relating to colonialism and its entailments, he notes areas of remarkable disconnection between the fields of postcolonial studies and Latin American studies. He concludes by making an argument against regionalist parochialism and advocating for a kind of "tactical postcolonialism" that would bring about a truly "global circulation of postcolonial studies as a potent intellectual currency for the exchange and development of perspectives on colonialism and its legacies from different regions and intellectual traditions" (this volume, 419).[1] In "After Empire," Coronil proposes to recast the study of empire and imperialism in several ways. He stresses the importance of recognizing the critical role of the Spanish and Portuguese in laying the groundwork for later imperial regimes and highlights the coeval formation of capitalism and imperialism in the unfolding history of relations between metropoles and colonies. Most important, and based on a definition of imperialism that privileges the perspective of populations subjected to a system of naturalized difference under hierarchical structures, Coronil argues for the recognition of the neoliberal global order as an imperial formation. While according to Coronil "globalcentrism" has superseded the Eurocentrism of earlier imperial forms, practices of othering and subjection are no less systematic and, in fact, all the more pernicious due to their masking by a rhetoric of formal, market-based global equality.

Such contributions to discussions and debates around empire, postcolonialism, and subalternity remain salient for scholars working in those fields. Just as important, though—and perhaps posing even deeper challenges for contemporary readers—are other aspects of Coronil's analysis and his intellectual and political commitments. Throughout these essays, as in his other works, Coronil insistently emphasizes the relationality of social and historical processes and particularly of the social, political, and analytical categories that tend to obscure that relationality. In his work on Occidentalism, he expresses an antiessentialist perspective that is surely

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informed by his engagements with postcolonial studies; he states the importance of recognizing cultural difference but also stresses the contrapuntal relationship between presumably distinct, and bounded, cultures. He levels an unrelenting critique of the ways European selves and their presumed others are generally construed, arguing instead, memorably, that "difference be historicized rather than essentialized, and that . . . boundaries and homogeneity be determined, not assumed" (350). Similarly, in "Listening to the Subaltern," Coronil seeks to transcend the polar opposition between dominator and dominated, or between unified modern and dispersed and fragmented postmodern subjects, to argue for a nonessentialist conception of subalternity. If, as he argues, both dominance and subalternity are relational rather than inherent qualities, then subalternity might extend, at moments, to encompass even social elites, or the state itself. Indeed, such a relational critique is the basis, in his comments on Scott, for Coronil's challenge to Manichaean analytical oppositions between state and market and the forms of power associated with them; it resides at the core of his analysis of Venezuelan political economy in *The Magical State*, and it informs his discussions of the relationship between imperialism and capitalism, in which states and markets are "dual facets of a unitary process," and imperialism figures as "capitalism's coeval condition of possibility" (442).

In his essays on postcolonialism and Latin American studies, and on empire, Coronil makes clear how a relational approach to historical processes might pose trenchant challenges to those fields. This informs Coronil's call to pluralize colonialism ("Latin American Postcolonial Studies," this volume, 399–424), to avoid privileging one empire—that is, the British empire—as a standard for colonial or postcolonial histories and experiences but instead to recognize multiple forms of Western empire and their global interrelation. It also drives his incitement to "globalize the periphery" by recognizing the mutual formation of metropoles and peripheries and, most important, the relational formation of dominant and subaltern subjects within the hierarchical and naturalized structures of difference characteristic of imperial and neoimperial regimes of power. Throughout his published work, and most explicitly in his discussions of postcolonialism and imperialism, Coronil faults recent scholars for their failure to reckon with the important work of Latin American dependency theorists and analysts. In his view, the importance of that work resides particularly in its relational understanding of metropoles and peripheries in imperial

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systems and its critical systemic analysis of wholes that could complement the postcolonialist emphasis—informed by the critique of modernity and its narratives—on the fragmentary study of parts. A thoroughgoing, even radical relationality was thus intrinsic to Coronil's call, in "Latin American Postcolonial Studies," for a "bifocal perspective" (403) that might marry the insights of both fields.

Such relationality is central to a second feature of Coronil's work: a politics of knowledge that is both dialectical and reflexive. This feature is suggested by his repeated use of chiasmic formulations at key points of his analysis. Hence, at stake in his conception of Occidentalism, Coronil writes, is the "politics of epistemology and the epistemology of politics" (350)—the "representation of power and the power to represent" (352). Subalternity figures, in his essay on that topic, as "not the being of a subject, but a subjected state of being" (374). As Coronil goes on to demonstrate in his discussion of subaltern state speech, the "locus of enunciation is inseparable from the enunciation of a locus," both related dimensions of a "single historical process" (382). A story Jorge Luis Borges wrote about an imperial map, Coronil writes in "Smelling Like a Market," is "not just about the truth of scientific representations but about the representation of truth, about power's representations and the power to represent, about the truth of power" (347).

More than rhetorical or poetic turns of phrase, such chiasmic formulations index a profoundly important approach to the knowledge of power—and the powers of knowledge not just to represent the world, but to change it. In his discussion of subalternity, Coronil sets the stakes high for his call to listen to silences and voices in the "cracks of dominant histories and narratives; to do so is to begin to overcome the "conditions that make subalternity possible" (369). In his critique of Scott, Coronil denounces the complicity of established ways of understanding the state with forms of imperial hubris and violence; he calls instead for the drawing of a new conceptual map that "would recognize the marks of human daring, a map that would dare our imagination, that would show new vistas and make us desire to mold the existing order into a different, dignified landscape for humankind" (398). Similarly, while exploring the relationship between Latin American studies and postcolonial studies, Coronil suggests the two might find dialogue and common cause in a "tactical postcolonialism"—one defined perhaps less by the history or intellectual program of either field, and more by a kind of conceptual work that is both deconstructive and political, thus contributing to struggles to "decolonize knowledge

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and build a genuinely democratic world" (420). In "After Empire," Coronil declares his intention to be that of making historical and contemporary forms of domination "at once more intelligible and more intolerable" (450); in "Beyond Occidentalism," he calls for us to sunder the connections between Western knowledge and Western power via a "decentered poetics that may help us imagine geohistorical categories for a nonimperial world" (324).

In a short essay of literary criticism entitled "Partial Enchantments of the Quixote," Borges—whom Coronil often cited—commented on several works that included depictions of those very works within their pages. Volume 2 of *Don Quixote*, for instance, includes a depiction of protagonists reading volume 1. Similarly, according to Borges, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* includes a scene in which actors onstage perform a tragedy very similar to *Hamlet*, and in one of the nights recounted in the *1001 Nights*, the sultana, recounting her nightly tales to the sultan, tells him his own story, triggering dizzying fears of infinite regress. Borges compares such literary devices to an imaginary map proposed by the American philosopher Josiah Royce in 1899. Royce evokes a map of England that is so exact as to represent the very slightest detail of the country's terrain on its surface. As the map is itself produced in England, it would then have to contain an image of itself of its own surface, which if it were to be exact, would then have to contain another image of the map within itself—and so on and so forth. What is so disquieting about such a thought experiment, according to Borges, is not the possibilities of infinite regress in Quixote's or Royce's map. Rather, it is that "those inversions suggest that if the characters in a story can be readers or spectators, then we, their readers or spectators, can be fictitious."[2]

In a similar way, the essays included in part III—particularly, "Beyond Occidentalism"—are strongly marked by a kind of dialectical reflexivity. They are maps *of* the world whose rigor extends to a reckoning of themselves as maps *in* the world. Yet at the same time they draw attention to what Borges called the fictitious nature of author and readers, particularly if we understand fiction, by one of its uses, to draw attention to the aspects of crafting or making that are intrinsic to any account, or any map. Ultimately, the poetic quality of "Beyond Occidentalism," and that of Coronil's other writings, derives from a realization that is as simple as it is radical: if power and knowledge are so intimately bound, then to conceive the world differently is to begin a process of change. As Fernando Coronil tells us, to write the poetry of the present is not only to represent the world, but to remake it.

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Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical citations given in this introduction refer to page numbers in the current volume.
2 Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions: 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 46.

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