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Mary Louise Pratt. *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation.* London: Routledge, 1992. $39.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-06095-0.

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In a classic joke about the international congress on the elephant, the English have a paper on the hunting of elephants; the French one on sauces for the elephant; the Americans one on the raising of bigger and better elephants. The Germans present "Prolegomena to the Study of the Elephant in 12 Volumes"; the Swedes discuss "The Elephant in the Time of Charles XII"; and their neighbor to the east poses the question, "What Does the Elephant Think of Finland?" Some of us who think of ourselves as Americanists were taken aback by publications generated by and for the Columbian Quincentenary that struck us as instances of Eurocentric navel-gazing. Here we were insisting that to better understand the nature and circumstances of contact as the Age of Discovery got underway it was necessary to learn indigenous languages, consult new sources, and try to look at what happened through the eyes of the non-European participants, and just then publishing companies started bringing out volumes of European intellectual history that posed the question, "What did Europeans think of America?"

It is easy for Americanists to see this as avoidance of what, for us, are the real issues, but to do so would be to take just the sort of intellectual shortcut we would accuse our colleagues of taking. Rather, we should clarify the distinction between books about what happened in the contact zones and what happened in Europe, a distinction that is often obscured by book titles. For instance, Tzvetan Todorov's ***The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*** (Harper and Row, 1984) is not primarily about the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru. These are pegs on which Todorov hangs his vision of European intellectual and psychological history. >From the viewpoint of recent historical and ethnohistorical work on Mesoamerica and the Andes his treatment of what happened in Mexico and Peru is superficial and uninformed (Descriptive linguists and cognitive psychologists would quibble too.), but that hardly counts, because his topic is really the Europeans. By contrast, L. N. Gumilev's ***Searches for an Imaginary Kingdom: The Legend of Prester John*** (Cambridge U. Press, 1987) uses the European idea of Prester John as an incidental peg on which to hang an immense study of the history of the peo-

ples of Central Asia. Some monographs treat both the physical arena of contact and the European imagination; for example, the last chapter of Philip Boucher's ***Cannibal Encounters: Europeans and Island Caribs, 1492-1763*** (Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1992) leaves the islands and takes us to Europe for an examination of the idea of Caribs in European writing.

Mary Louise Pratt's study of travel writing is also a hybrid. The travel writers went to the places they later wrote about for their European audiences and sometimes barely survived to cash in on their experiences. In this sense, travel writing does emanate from the contact zone. But the travel accounts she has chosen were written by Europeans for a European market, and in that, they are as revealing of European society (if not more so) than of the interiors of Africa and South America. Reading them, as the author shows us, tells us much about the assumptions of budding European natural science, venture capitalism, and romanticism as well as illuminating gender distinctions in content and perspective. Women, it turns out, paid attention to different things than men and had different expectations of themselves.

This thesis makes good sense and is illustrated with compelling and convincing excerpts from travel accounts. Almost at the end of the book Pratt, a professor in the Departments of Spanish and Portuguese and Comparative Literature at Stanford, mentions that she teaches a course in travel writing, and one can see how ***Imperial Eyes*** would take shape from such a course. I had wondered why the earliest travel accounts she deals with date from so long after first contact with Africa and the Americas, why Spanish accounts of the interiors of Mexico and Peru in the first century of contact (Bernal DAEaz del Castillo for Mexico, BernabAE Cobo for Peru) and the great debates about the spiritual nature of Africans and Amerindians (whether they could be enslaved or not) weren't in the index. I also was disconcerted by the ambivalent treatment of Mexico, sometimes as part of South or Spanish America, sometimes excluded because not part of South America, yet popping up anyway, even in three illustrations. And why the limitation to North European travel writers and audiences as though Iberia itself, as well as Spanish America, had been (and remained) effectively fenced off from the rest of Europe? Understanding these issues in terms of a given number of weeks of a course and a manageable reading list for students settled many questions for me.

I must say, however, that the jargon of critical theory that Pratt employs throughout the book would make me skeptical of putting the book on a reading list . Much that is written in obscure ways could be put more simply and clearly at the risk of being shown to be not particularly profound or innovative. (See John M. Ellis, ***Against Deconstruction***, Princeton U. Press, 1989.) What is anyone to make of sentences such as, "In a parodic, transculturating gesture, Sarmiento refocuses the discourse of accumulation back on its own context of origin, the capitalist metropolis" (p. 192)? Or "the naturalist's production of knowledge has some decidedly non-phallic aspects" (p. 56)? If only we could be sure the author has a wicked sense of humor. I don't believe that writing with the verbs "to image,"to legitimate," and "to valorize"; the adjectives "hegemonic" and "empowered"; and reference to "the other" will have long shelf life. I am unsure, after finishing the book, of what Pratt means by the word "transculturation" in her title. I suppose it has to do with the fact that while the travel writers themselves had first-hand experience, their readers were dependent on them as conduits for whatever fuel might fire their imaginations as arm-chair travelers. Her point is certainly well-taken that after independence from Spain was secured, intellectuals in the new-born nations turned to the publications of European writers, especially Alexander von Humboldt, for a

vision of their own countries not mediated by their former colonial rulers.

I wonder about the alternation between "AmErica" with an accent mark, as though it were Spanish, and "America" without the accent. I assume the author means to distinguish between the European idea of the place and the place itself, but the usage struck me as inconsistent, and in any case, it isn't explained.

Pratt herself seems not entirely committed to the critical jargon, which she calls "modern parlance" (p. 52). Sometimes facing pages have impenetrable stuff to the left facing clear and compelling writing on the right. (See pages 112 and 113. Pratt can write beautifully.) For every page that I riddled with question marks, there was one that I found informative, convincing, and highly satisfying. An example is page 188, where she points out that "not everyone was to be liberated, equalized, and fraternized by the South American revolutions any more than they were by those in France or the United States," and goes on to point out that for large segments of the populations these revolutions led to intensified exploitation, giving as an example the creation of large haciendas with armies of laborers who had no land of their own. That independence was not universally positive for all citizens of the new republics cannot be overstressed. The failure of revolutionary promises has shaped the history of our century and will continue to shape the next.

There are some details that can only irritate an Americanist. Pratt has the date of Guaman Poma's letter to the king off by two years (p. 2). Mesoamerican documents are known as codices, not "codicils" (p. 136). As for syphillis being "imported ***back*** to Europe" (p. 138, my emphasis), most of the evidence points to the disease's being a New World scourge that reached Europe with Columbus's returning crew. Sugar cane is in no way a "uniquely American product" (p. 174). As for the caption for Illustration 24, "a mountain modeled on Chimborazo and the pyramid of Cholula in Ecuador in Mexico" was surely intended to read, "Chimbarozo in Ecuador and the pyramid of Cholula in Mexico," but the fact of the matter is, the snowy cone rising behind the defeated warrior is a perfectly fine representation of Popocatepetl, the volcano traditionally associated with the Aztec empire and its fall.

My ambivalences are obvious. To learn about Africa and the Americas on the point of contact and in the centuries following, one needs to go to other sources. I recommend ***Imperial Eyes*** to anyone willing to read through patches of obscurity in order to get a vivid sense of how European assumptions and expectations, different for men and for women, colored the first-hand observations of European travelers in these places and subsequently their accounts of their experiences for the home audience.

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