REVIEW ESSAY

The Imagination at Work within the Global Economy

What's Love Got to Do with It? Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic. **Denise Brennan. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.**

Imperial Nature: The World Bank and Struggles for Social Justice in the Age of Globalization. **Michael Goldman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.**

William H. Leggett
Middle Tennessee State University

The Imagination at Work

As those of us involved in the anthropology of work continue to interrogate cultural processes surrounding the global economy, we find ourselves increasingly confronted (and confounded) by the imagination of those at work in spaces of transnational encounter. How, specifically, is the imagination being used by those at work in the global economy and how are anthropologists addressing this important terrain of cultural and identity construction? This essay is a preliminary attempt to answer these questions.

A quick glance at the ethnographic literature reveals three general plots of imaginative expression in which anthropologists have planted stakes: (1) the historical (or colonial or imperial) imagination; (2) the sexual/romantic imagination; and (3) the managerial imagination. In addressing each of these imaginative spheres I will draw briefly from my own research before turning to the work of Denise Brennan and Michael Goldman. Finally I will look briefly but critically at the management literature that has appropriated anthropology in the making of "corporate culture" and "international management" practices. Here, I will argue, the imagination has been put to use in an explicit form of knowledge production and power maintenance. Let me begin, however, by taking stock of the imagination within recent anthropological literature.

The Anthropological Imagination

Certainly the imagination has been part of ethnographic discourse in a systematic way since at least John and Jean Comaroff's *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (1992). In this important text the scholars are concerned with the imagination of historians and anthropologists in the production of a body of historical knowledge (the "colonial library" in the words of V.Y. Mudimbe [1988]) that constructed spaces of (largely) Euro-American conquest in the minds of (largely) Western scholars. Still, it is best to think of the Comaroffs' text not as single-handedly spawning an imaginative industry but instead as reflecting an intellectual interest in the historical imaginary as it informed the discursive production of asymmetrical spaces of encounter. An un-exhaustive list of titles and terms coined by scholars engaged with the imagination illustrates just how prolific this movement has been: The Imperialist Imagination (Friedrichsmeyer, Lennox, and Zantop 1998), The Colonial Imagination (Leggett 2005), The Anti-Colonial Imagination (Anderson 2006), The Modern Social Imagination (Taylor 2004), The English Imagination (Hall 2002), The Multicultural Imaginary (San Juan 1997), The Imperial Unconscious (Chrisman 1990), The Transnational Imaginary (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996, as well as Shohat and Stam 1996), Colonial Fantasies (Zantop 1997), Colonial Desire (Young 1995), Transnational Desires (Brennan 2004), Colonial Mimicry (Bhabha 1997), and Border Thinking (Mignolo 2000).

While an examination of the production of historical knowledge within the halls of science and academia continues (and is certainly the central issue for many of the scholars listed above), what concerns me here is an ethnographic movement toward the imagination at work in everyday global encounters, particularly those encounters necessitated by global economic processes. In particular I have become fascinated with the ways that the imperial past is evoked and put to use within the transnational workplaces of the present. And while the imperial imagination might appear most prominently in spaces saturated with Orientalist and colonial histories, it could well be that the global workspaces of the twenty-first century simply invite just such imperial references.

Within a global economic context—be it transnational corporate office, off-shore manufacturing center, or tourist destination—the western travelers appear increasingly comfortable "indexing" a body of knowledge related to historical encounters in which the dichotomous relations between self and other open the flood gates to a deluge of Enlightenment-era oppositions: civil/savage, superior/inferior, benevolent/malevolent, cunning/lazy, leader/follower. It is with this modern reliance on an imperial ordering of the world that I begin this essay.

The Colonial Imagination

As Taussig has stated, "all societies live by fictions taken as real" (1987:121). The perpetuation of transnational encounters brought about by global economic processes has allowed for the broadcast of a particular fiction through the travels of Western workers into non-Western, often post-colonial spaces. These spaces are far from arbitrary to the global economy and are saturated with the history of Western expansion and domination. As such they are especially susceptible to geographic mappings that deny contemporaneousness. In such places the colonial imagination appears, to paraphrase Dirks, as a mythical discourse constructed out of historical encounters (1993:280). Through the historical imagination a union is forged between Western populations and a divide created between East and West (or North and South) as transnational economic processes become situated within a genealogy of empire. This divide is particularly evident in the figures of speech many of the above mentioned scholars attach to the imagination—for example, irony (Jameson 1991) ambivalence (Bhabha 1997), terror (Taussig 1987 and Leggett 2005), desire (Young 1995), dissonance (Puwar 2004), disjuncture *and* difference

(Appadurai 1990)—by way of emphasizing the cultural/social distance produced, maintained, and, at times, transgressed by social actors negotiating encounters between (post) colonizer and (post) colonized.

As it produces social distance, the colonial imagination simultaneously confuses space for time, locating non-Western geographies and peoples prior to a presupposed Western modernity. The imagery implicit in the colonial imagination, with its emphasis on the savage, the barbaric, and the untamed, attempts to locate non-Western, non-White populations temporally behind the West while placing the Western expatriate in a position of superiority over locally born peers and subordinates. The colonial imagination thus serves not only as a construction of reality that denies the contemporaneousness of human populations, it operates also as "a high-powered medium of domination" that recalls the asymmetry of colonial relations (Taussig 1987:121).

I found such an ordering of the world to be present in the transnational office spaces of Jakarta, Indonesia where American-born expatriates imagined themselves as taming a "savage" landscape in their everyday office practices (this despite their working in the midst of the trappings of modernity—including sleek high-rises as well as the latest in information, manufacturing, and research technologies). The language of Western expatriates at work in Jakarta often freely and unapologetically evoked Indonesia's Portuguese, British and Dutch colonial pasts, locating the practices of American-owned transnational corporations within a colonial genealogy framed largely as a benevolent and civilizing mission.

"Where would they be without us?" Christopher, an expatriate working just over a year at BCB, asked me one day (his tone revealing a slight frustration with my constant barrage of questions). "Do you think they would have any of this?" he went on, gesturing with a nod of his head toward the view from the window of his 44th-floor office. Through the smog and dust one could see the surrounding glass and steel sprouting up for miles into the distance. Much of it was in a state of mid-construction and all of it was embedded within standstill traffic. "They probably wouldn't even want this," he concluded without, I thought, a hint of irony.

In his statements Christopher was making explicit the dichotomy between Western selves and local (read native) others around which most transnational offices in Jakarta are organized. In addition, he was drawing a connection between his working presence in Jakarta and all past Western capitalist endeavors that have taken place in Indonesia. The "us" in his statement transcended Christopher's own office (as indicated by the head bob toward the surrounding landscape) and, in doing so, united all Westerners past and present in a shared benevolent mission of modernization and progress. Inside the offices of Western-owned transnational corporations in Jakarta such an imaginary was effective in maintaining corporate hierarchies that were stratified not only by management position but by race and national identity (see Leggett 2005).

Many offices took their organizational structure to colonial extremes by employing a three-tiered system with Western executives at the top, Indonesian nationals filling the bottom rungs, and Chinese "middlemen" negotiating the space between. This organizational structure, far from a remnant of Indonesia's colonial past, was produced and maintained not only through unspoken corporate hiring practices but also through a colonial imaginary at work within the transnational present. Through this imaginary it was assumed that Chinese-Indonesians were (because they had typically held money management positions in Indonesia's colonial past) better attuned to Western business practices than Indonesian nationals but also (due to their "Asian-ness") capable of bridging the gap thought to exist between American and Indonesian cultures. In reproducing this colonial organizational structure, the Western-owned transnational corporations not only racialized their office hierarchies but also fed into unspoken national policies that positioned Chinese-Indonesians outside of Indonesian national identity. When the Asian economic crisis hit Indonesia in 1997, this segregation had devastating effects for Indonesia's Chinese community.

This (too brief) illustration is useful in exposing the persistence of the colonial imagination in today's transnational work spaces. And yet the colonial imagination is but one form of imagination that comes to pass in the modern spaces of encounter created through the economic exigencies of the global economy.

The Romantic Imagination

In *What's Love Got to Do with It?*, Denise Brennan examines "how globalization has effected a dramatic transformation of a Caribbean beach town into a 'sexscape' with unequal opportunities for its Dominican residents, on the one hand, and foreign residents and tourists, on the other" (44). In her descriptions of the migrant communities to Sosúa—both domestic and foreign—Brennan evokes an imagination of possibilities that, in its own way, taps into the Dominican Republic's colonial history. Sosúa gets imagined as an idyllic paradise, a land of opportunity in its raw and untapped possibilities, and as a "lawless" frontier town yet to be "settled" or civilized. Here the imagination of "paradise" mixes with imagined (and real) economic opportunities and the threat (and excitement) of crime and violence. And it is through these multiple imaginings that Dominican and European residents of Sosúa come to encounter and understand one another. "The 'jumble' of things Dominican, German, and from elsewhere . . . translates into mistrust, mythmaking, and sometimes animosity between the diverse groups of individuals living in Sosúa as well as within them" (51).

The notion of paradise plays a key role in the sex tourist trade in Sosúa: "Part of Sosúa's appeal to sex tourists lies in the overall experience Sosúa provides as the backdrop for their sexual transactions" (29). European consumers of sex, Brennan argues, are in Sosúa not simply for the sexual encounter but for the "powerful" experience of being a rich foreigner in a poor town. "Just as important as cheap prices for sex in Sosúa is the experience that *everything* is cheaper than at home; thus foreigners, able to afford nearly anything they desire, can enjoy 'feeling rich'" (29).

Feelings of "richness" are tied into the fantasy Europeans have mapped onto the Dominican Republic; this fantasy, according to Brennan, is built upon the basic colonial components of desire, sex, race, and power. At the heart of sexual desire by European men (primarily) for

Dominican women (primarily) is a history of empire, conquest, and desire. "Dominican sex workers are portrayed as 'hot,' 'dark,' 'cheap,' and 'easy to find.' In sex tourism we are well familiar with First World travelers/consumers' seeking—and exoticizing—dark-skinned 'native' bodies in the developing world for cut-rate prices" (199).

Of course within the colonial imaginary, the exoticized body never stands alone but is inevitably located within the unsettled, often dangerous landscape. This point is nicely illustrated through Brennan's discussion of tourists imagining the space of their Dominican vacation. Despite the fact that these tourists are sequestered off from the "real" Dominican Republic within hotel enclaves that are fortified against the outside, the tourists speak of the "danger" encountered in this "Third World" paradise.

> The tourist resorts reinforce the image of the local population as violent and criminal. It is virtually impossible to enter the gated resorts without wearing an identification bracelet that indicates you are a guest of the hotel . . . With twenty-four hour security guards at the beach, the bracelet system, and a strict "no sex workers permitted" policy . . . Tourists are "protected," indeed shielded from the country and its people outside of its gates. (77)

Ironically, in some cases this protection can work in favor of the sex workers.

> Some women intentionally bring clients back to their boardinghouse rooms or apartments to show how little they have and thus evoke sympathy and—possibly—big tips . . . [but] sex workers' practice of bringing men to their rooms was not always an explicit strategy to obtain more money or material goods from foreign clients. Rather, because the all-inclusive hotels prohibited the entrance of any nonpaying guests into the hotels, clients often wound up at the women's boarding-house rooms. (145–146)

These rooms infringe on the fantasy of paradise that the tourists engage as they sit on the beach or walk down the streets of Sosúa. While the streets of Sosúa are photogenic in their buildings' "quaint facades," the insides, where the sex workers live and work, expose a reality—of "unfinished walls and ceilings" and the "smell of communal toilet"—that soils paradise while, at the same time, adding a powerful level of "authenticity" to their tourist experience (146).

One of Brennan's key concerns is with the practices and meanings of "love" that have emerged in Sosúa as tourism and the sex-trade continue to prosper. Specifically, she is concerned with how "resort workers (men and women) and sex workers attempt to parlay their access to foreign tourists into marriage proposals and visa sponsorships" (96). In the process Brennan once again makes useful work of the imagination, but it is not love necessarily that is being imagined. For the most part the Dominican women and men Brennan spoke with described their relationships with European tourists without use of the words "romance" and "love" (107). What is imagined is the "better life" thought to exist in Europe: "Because migrating to Europe is a relatively new phenomenon, not many former sex workers . . . or resort workers . . . have returned to Sosúa to dispel the myths and gossip of an easy and fantasy-filled life . . . Instead, sex workers and resort workers imagine lives of material comfort for themselves and, in the case of the sex workers and female resort workers, for their children" (109–110). Even after these transnational relationships fail, as they often do, and the Dominican women return to their home, "the community of sex workers still idealizes these failed migration stories" (191).

> In sex workers' depictions of life in Europe, problems of speaking another language and living in another culture, questions I raised about potential racism, and issues in domestic life with less-than-loving husbands who have traditional expectations for household roles were all waved away. Women such as Andrea (who is dumping one German man for another with more money) became symbols of all that is possible in Germany. (193)

Where fantasies of love *do* to play a role is with the European men involved in "transnational courting." According to Elena, one of the women Brennan spent time with, "You have to write that you *love* him and that you miss him. Write that you cannot wait to see him again. Tell him you think about him every day" (111–112). As one bartender told Brennan, "The men want to believe, so they do, at least as long as they are on holiday" (201). The effectiveness of this strategy not withstanding (the woman never heard from this man again), it does speak to the fantasies of European men about Dominican women—fantasies promoted through internet sites, classified ads, sex guides, and word of mouth: "Just as Dominican women look to European men to be everything they imagine Dominican men never will be, European men, too, compare Dominican women to European women. They imagine Dominican women as more sexual, more compliant, and having fewer financial demands than European women" (194–195).

One of the important points to emerge from Brennan's exploration of love and romance in the Dominican Republic is the dialectical nature of the imagination. As histories of encounter are always dialectical (if also asymmetrical) we need to be careful not to place one population's discursive practices in the realm of "memory"—in effect legitimizing their historical references—while diminishing those of the powerful as "imaginary" and, as such, baseless. The post-colonial spaces of global encounter invite an imaginative history from both sides of the asymmetrical relationship. As anthropologists we need to not privilege one side over the other in the production of imaginative discourses while, at the same time, also being aware that one side is in a better position to insert these discourses into institutions of power where they become central components in larger structures of inequality. Brennan is largely successful in tapping into the imagination of both Dominican and European residents and sojourners in the town of Sosúa.

Imaginative Management

In *Imperial Nature*, Michael Goldman takes a critical ethnographic look at the World Bank. What he finds is an institution so thoroughly saturated by its own knowledge

production that those working within the Bank are blind to the economic, cultural, and social realities of those they purport to help. Indeed the employees of the Bank rarely if ever encounter the individuals they are in the business of assisting:

> Its staff spend no time with the hungry or poor—they themselves admit it would be foolhardy to send highly paid loan officers, who fly on business-class tickets, to stay in five-star hotels, and are accompanied by staff assistants, to sit and chat with itinerant laborers and street dwellers about the structural barriers that keep them from meeting their basic needs and facilitating their desires. In the Bank's own institutional linguistics, this would not be "cost efficient." (xvi)

While I am not so concerned here with the detailed history Goldman provides of the emergence of a "green neoliberalism" body of knowledge and practices at the World Bank, I am interested in the imperial imagination that sits uncomfortably at the core of this bureaucratic body. Goldman argues that the World Bank has attempted to produce an ideology and practice through "green neoliberalism" that simultaneously enriches the North at the expense of the South. He locates the origins of this environmental neoliberalism in colonialism and argues that the maintenance of power that was central to colonial ideologies is also central to this "centralized" policy of sustained ecologically sound development.

> Traveling beyond the advanced capitalist states of the North, neoliberalism reflects a set of aggressive interventions into the less capitalized territories of the South where "undervalued" and "undervalorized" human and natural resources are hypothesized to exist, and where "backward" social institutions are said to rule. (8)

Goldman goes on to argue that:

> [T]he current, neoliberal political-economic agenda did not start in the West and then spread to "the rest" but was constituted in postcolonial capitalist North-South relations from the start. It built upon the power relations embedded and embodied in former colonial capitalist relations; wove its way through the World Bank's development regimes of poverty alleviation, debt management, and structural adjustment; and now thrives in the Bank's version of environmentally sustainable development, expanding the neoliberal project and new avenues for capital accumulation worldwide. (8–9)

Goldman effectively makes clear that there is a colonial body of thinking—an imagination, if you will—behind the current neoliberal development policies of the World Bank.

> Fundamental links between countries within the North-South world system are made invisible through the everyday discursive practices of development, such that today development is still interpreted as a gift of the North and specific failures are attributed to the shortcomings of leaders or cultures of the South, reductively assumed to be mired in corruption and irrationality. (21)

He uncovers the imperial thinking within the World Bank through nuanced ethnographic research within the office partitions of the Bank itself; arguing that the Bank has become more dependent for its existence on its knowledge-production capacities than on its ability to raise capital (34).

> As a data collector, the World Bank is unrivaled, sending missions abroad to study everything from government budgets to ownership records for village lands. Much of this information is not actually published by the Bank, largely because governments consider such disclosures to be national security risks, but the Bank's published reports do not hesitate to draw conclusions from this exclusive information . . . As a producer of scientific knowledge, the Bank is also peerless: not only does its professional staff have access to rare data, but they have been trained at top universities. According to one report, 80 percent received degrees from the same top U.S. or British Ph.D. Programs. (101)

Goldman goes on to describe the headquarters of the Bank in some detail, revealing something of the "organizational culture" that allows the Bank to thrive while never really improving its practices in reaction to catastrophic failures in economic and ecological development throughout the world. Such ethnographic interrogations of global workspaces are where, I would argue, anthropologists are apt to find the most revealing aspects of the historical imagination at work within the global economic network of the twenty-first century. What *Imperial Nature* dissects for the reader is the "elite power network" at the core of the global political economy (12). It should not surprise us that this core makes use of a body of knowledge first created during the original age of global commerce.

A Critique of Imagination

As anthropologists of work who recognize the proliferation of colonial and imperial imaginaries within the global economy, we must continue to seek out areas of inquiry that may take us no further than the business and management colleges housed within our universities. Here we might very well find that the binaries of colonial difference discussed above are being translated into the seemingly impartial rhetoric of transnational management. One can see such possibilities in the title of Caslione and Thomas's *Global Manifest Destiny* (2002) as well as in the other "cultural" and "cross-cultural management" literature that now rest uncomfortably on the edge of most business educations. These works often display little hesitance in their move from an appreciation of "different" cultures to an agenda that involves the creation of effective "universal" cultural practices that can overcome the "obstacles" culture throws in the way of business efficiency and profitability (see, for example Alvesson 1994, Earley and Erez 1997, Earley and Gibson 2002, Erez and Earley 1993, and Trompenaars 1994). In the process of creating effective business cultures these works inadvertently revert to dichotomous readings of world cultures in which Western business is "efficient," "productive," and largely "culture-free" while "Other" world cultures are trapped in "traditional" practices and "customs" that range from the quaint to

the corrupt. Anthropologists need to enter these spaces of knowledge production, building on the work of Brennan and Goldman, with a critical eye toward how the imagination is being put to work within management circles.

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