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Of Passionate Curves and Desirable Cadences: Themes on Waiwai Social Being

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constraints of tropical and desert environments and by cultural patterns of resistance" (88)—hardly news to most readers, I expect. Her concluding observations about borderlands are more robust, if still frustratingly generic:

The emergence of regions in the nineteenth century with recognizable spatial and social coherence in Sonora and Chiquitos proved integral to the transition from imperial to transnational flows that created frontiers of difference and contention, but also of confluence and synthesis. Regionality became increasingly important for constructing identities that denied or superseded the histories of conflict and the multiple local identities that had given depth and meaning to both areas (325).

Although *Landscapes of Power and Identity* is less than completely satisfying as a comparative project, it does a number of things extremely well. It offers a wealth of information on a broad spectrum of indigenous responses to New World colonialism: rebellion, collaboration, flight, canny negotiation, creative borrowing and syncretism, and ethnogenesis. It complicates in useful ways our understanding of "traditional" religious practices, which for many of the indigenous peoples of both regions were subtly reshaped by the mission experience in ways that would be easy to miss without a historian's sharp eye. It provides a richly detailed account of the Jesuit mission system (dating roughly to 1591-1767 in Sonora and 1691-1767 in Chiquitos), which despite its flaws proved to be one of the most sophisticated, benign, and durable colonization schemes implemented in the New World. And for Amazonianists interested in eastern Bolivia, it offers a data-rich and theoretically sophisticated account of how Chiquitos has been reshaped by nearly five centuries of encounters between the indigenous and European worlds.

Of Passionate Curves and Desirable Cadences: Themes on Waiwai Social Being. George Mentore. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xiv + 378 pp., illustrations, notes, references, index. \$49.90 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8032-3175-7. [www.nebraskapress.unl.edu]

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Some thirty years have passed since George Mentore set foot in the village of Shepariymo, in the interior rain forest of Guyana, to commence his fieldwork among its Waiwai inhabitants. By his own admission, this book—the fruit of his sojourns with the Waiwai—has been a long time coming. One of the first things he tells us about it is that the manuscript has been completely rewritten at least three times. It shows. Every single sentence, it seems, has

been worked and reworked, smoothed and polished, into passages whose curves and cadences—as the book's title suggests—evoke those that the author finds in Waiwai culture and social life. The verbal craftsmanship is stunning. In its warmth, grace and generosity, Mentore's prose captivates the reader, just as he was manifestly captivated by corresponding virtues in his Waiwai hosts. The result is an unqualified masterpiece of ethnographic writing. I could stop here, but this is a review, and reviews are supposed to be critical. At the risk of sounding ungrateful for this marvelous book, I would offer as my principal criticism the observation that the text is altogether *too* polished. It shows every sign of having been worked over too much. Or in a word, it is overwrought.

The fundamental theme of the book is about how the continuity of Waiwai social life is secured through the balanced yet asymmetrical complementarity of filiation and affinity, manifested in the relations between men and women, hunters and prey, farmers and plants, and played out upon the body in its differentially gendered dispositions, sensibilities, maneuvers and adornments. This complementarity is everywhere. It is evident, for example, in the way a male archer must set his arrow in the feminine arch of the bow in order that his masculinity be productively realized in the arrow's flight and in the game it brings down. And it is evident in the plaited weave of the capacious conical roof of the dwelling house, the most striking and effective embodiment of domestic encirclement, made from leaves of two kinds whose respective forms or designs are unequivocally redolent of male and female principles. The sheer consistency with which this complementarity appears to work itself out through every domain of Waiwai life lends it a compelling force—so much so, indeed, that the author feels justified in speaking of the “Waiwai paradigm.” Tentatively introduced at first, the paradigm gains an ever firmer foothold as the work proceeds until, placed in the driving seat, it pulls the rest of the account behind it.

Mentore begins his ethnography with a chapter devoted to the village of Shepariymo, including a touching and affectionate portrait of every one of its adult inhabitants, each with his or her distinctive biography, foibles and quirks of character. One of the oddities of the book, however, is that after taking so much trouble to introduce his *dramatis personae*—the people, as the author persists in telling us, who are destined to play determinate roles in the drama of Waiwai social life—they scarcely make any further entries on the pages of the monograph. With one or two exceptions, they appear again only twice: first in an account of a communal peccary hunt and the subsequent distribution of meat (summarized in a kinship diagram that has been inexplicably placed some sixty pages later in a quite different chapter); secondly in a census of farm plots which seems to have been included for no other reason than to demonstrate the utter incongruity of quantitative analyses based on supposedly objective measures and universal scales of reckoning. In neither case is the ‘who's who’ of the village provided in the chapter on Shepariymo relevant to an understanding

of what is going on. Why, then, do we need the chapter at all?

The chapter is crucial, I believe, because it reminds us that the Waiwai of Shepariymo are real people and not merely creatures of the paradigm that Mentore has created for them or, more importantly, for us. It has to be said that for the most part, the description and analysis glide along at a rather high level of abstraction and generalization, on which personal idiosyncrasies and incompatibilities—or what might be called the rough edges of social life—are ironed out to make way for a *Waiwai* cultural logic, *Waiwai* beliefs, interpretations and understandings, *Waiwai* sensibilities, and even *Waiwai* bodies. It is in this regard that I felt the study to be overwrought: at the point where the Waiwai paradigm takes over from actual Waiwai people. Objectified abstractions stalk these pages: endowed with an agency of their own, they pull the strings of manifest bodily practice. Rather than people doing things within the ambit of Waiwai society, it seems that Waiwai society takes hold of people, grasping and molding their bodies in such a way as to secure its own continuity. Rather than men and women bodily doing things, masculinity and femininity secure their effects through the bodies of men and women. Once the paradigm has taken over, it acquires a momentum of its own, allowing the author to pile on elaborations of his own that ripple out in ever expanding circles, and in ever lengthening sentences.

There is indeed a temptation, when revising a work, for it to become longer and more complex with every iteration. Elaborate verbal constructions, often prefaced by the telltale phrase “in other words,” sound so much more elegant, nuanced and evocative than the rough and ready propositions the writer might have started with! Yet readers beguiled by the slippery surface of over-polished prose may all too easily drop their guard, letting formulations pass that in a more coarse-grained work would stop them dead in their tracks. Here is one in Mentore’s book that almost passed me by: “To become a social person, the individual must submit to society.” And here is another: “Society always takes persuasive hold of its individual members, and in return the individual as social person clings to society.” A few pages later, Mentore goes on to explain that “the different styles in which societies appropriate the body of the individual can be said to be the cultural means by which they distinguish themselves from one another.” What kind of social and cultural theory is this? It certainly sounds familiar. Indeed, despite sweeping references to a more contemporary literature, as well as hints of the author’s one-time commitment to Marxism, it is not a million miles from good, old-fashioned structural-functionalism. Stripped of its literary elegance and evocative force, the gist of Mentore’s argument is that Waiwai bodily practices, performed by persons in their assigned roles as hunters, farmers, ritual participants and bearers of designs, serve to maintain the continuity of the social life of which they are an integral part.

In a brief prologue, Mentore introduces himself by way of an astute

commentary on his colonial-era birth certificate, on which are inscribed the words: "George Mentore, Black, Native of British Guiana." The rest of the book can be read as an impassioned protest against the categorical indignities meted out—in the name of civilization—by state powers on subject peoples the world over, and as a resounding affirmation of the possibility of a form of life that overturns everything the offending certificate stands for. Perhaps that is why, whenever comparisons are drawn, they are almost always between the Waiwai and the capitalist West rather than with neighboring Amazonian peoples (about which we learn surprisingly little, despite much evidence of coming and going), or with indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. Invariably, too, if not unreasonably, the West comes out in an unfavorable light. Having begun with an account of bureaucratic heartlessness and insensitivity, the book ends with an unashamedly romantic and erotic tale of young love. The tale has a happy ending. Waiwai beauty triumphs over the ugliness of the modern state: the complementarity of bodies that run into one another trumps the categorical logic of partition and individuation. This is, indeed, a joyful and life-affirming book. Yet it is an affirmation curiously at odds with the objectifications of its theory.

The Amazon: Land Without History. Euclides da Cunha (translation by Ronald Sousa of *À margem da história* (1909), with an introduction by Lúcia Sá). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 96 pp., introduction, maps, bibliography, index. \$39.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper). ISBN 0195172051, 0195172043. [www.oup.com]

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In 1905 Euclides da Cunha led a Brazilian mission to define the boundaries between his country and Peru, in Acre which Brazil had just acquired from Bolivia. The international team sailed up the Purus River to its headwaters, and this first glimpse of the rubber-rich Amazonian forests made a profound impression on the young Cunha. He was already famous for his first book, *Os sertões* (translated as *Rebellion in the Backlands* by Samuel Putnam in 1944) about the Canudos rebellion in north-east Brazil. He planned to write a long book on the Amazon and started by publishing seven essays—which form this book. He was killed, by his wife's lover, in 1909. But Euclides da Cunha has always enjoyed cult status in Brazil.

To a modern reader, Cunha's writing is anachronistic. He was a patriotic official, writing at a time when all western nations were at the height of their imperialistic ambitions. The young republic of Brazil was no exception. Its