

Constituting Latin America

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As the eighteenth century ended, a nascent United States of America consolidated and was regarded by its statesmen as the first truly modern enterprise, a union that valued individual liberty and the right to self-determination. Over the course of the following century, the country's territory would triple in size, most notably from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. By the year 1898, as expansion slowed, the United States would inherit colonies so that, by the end of the century the country transformed from colonized to colonizer. Growth was by no means uncontested, and for much of the century leading up to the Civil War, particularly in the case of Texas, the issue of slavery firmly divided public opinion regarding territorial expansion. In this paper, I intend to analyze a few key texts that might be representative of larger, though not totalizing, discourses pervading the United States at the beginning and middle of the nineteenth century. I set out to accomplish two goals. First, I explore key nineteenth century writings and policies concerning Latin America or the Spanish American colonies. My entry point will be the Monroe Doctrine, which dictated US foreign policy for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What I find is not a history of imperial aspirations resting upon knowledges of inferior peoples living in faraway places. Instead, these discourses were operationalized so as to *stop* the United States from rampant annexation, on the grounds that alien races were fundamentally incongruous and incapable of assimilating superior US values. Second, I intend to explore how notions of modernity and history underscored such discourses and allowed them to proliferate. I contend that the United States, though it operationalized modernity differently than its European counterpart, rested upon the same epistemological grounds that rendered knowledge of the Other as merely history of the Same (Mudimbe 1988). These epistemological foundations permissioned great and terrible territorial expansion at the expense of those whom US statesmen knew through expeditions and emissary reports.

I draw my inquiries and framework from Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979), V.Y. Mudimbe in *The Invention of Africa* (1988), and Janet Roitman in *Anti-Crisis* (2014). The authors at hand clarify the production of knowledge that allowed for great territorial expansion and economic exploitation, often in direct opposition to values promoted by the conquering powers. I find particularly relevant the epistemological foundations upon which European empires are built, and I bridge some of these ideas across the Atlantic in nineteenth century United States. To this end I use Mudimbe's classification of "the body of discourses on non-Western societies into two main groups:" history and anthropology. The first, history, relies on the notion of diachronic cultures over a period of homogenous and transcendental time, which produces the second, anthropology, to diagnose synchronous (and contemporary) Other places as somehow undeveloped using measures of homogenous time (Mudimbe 1988). The Other from a faraway time is found present in the Other from a faraway place. In light of these concepts, I use the Monroe Doctrine and rhetoric leading up to the Mexican-American War to elucidate common discourses proliferating in the United States from about 1820 to the middle of the 1840s. The transition will see first a declaration of nonintervention and sympathy with independence movements in the Americas, albeit with a teleology that places the US as markedly advanced, and second, the introduction of race into already existing discourses rendering the Other as fundamentally inferior.

Janet Roitman accounts for eighteenth and nineteenth century European notions of history and modernity that birthed the idea of the United States. And these are the notions, I argue, that allowed for the encounters with Mexico to pass in the 1840s. A period of intense private *moralization* accompanied the period of intense secularization in the eighteenth century. This moralization proliferated at the level of the individual, while secularization developed at the level of the state. John Locke continued this logic with a claim that "the public realm is constituted by the private realm," indicating that the secular state is comprised of moral individuals (Roitman 2014, 26). In the eighteenth

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century, Thomas Jefferson would paraphrase John Lock's ideas of liberty in his Declaration of Independence. The ideas that private moral citizens constitute a state continued to grow in the French Masonic lodges and Bayle's Republic of Letters, who argued that a demand for reason and rationality revealed constant attempts at falsification, a constant burden of proof. "Falsification, as a function of reason, constitutes an ever-present horizon, such that the very reliability of reason is constantly assailed, making reason by and large a matter of faith" (Roitman 2014, 27). Morally driven rational citizens molded reason into a political ideology that produced the challenge of individual liberty and self-determination. These goals would rely heavily on a conception of history to such an extent that:

[A] morally just and rational planning of history coincide[d] in a hoped-for future, and the achievement of that future require[d] an interpretation of the relationship of the present to the past (Roitman 2014, 28).

The future *must* be different than the present; it *must* rupture from the past because liberation entails a breaking free of past ruling structures. If the future is where modernity lies, what happens when the modernity is achieved, when the end of history is at hand? When the constitution of United States is believed to have achieved every end of liberty and self-determination, what happens next?

For at least the first half of the nineteenth century, US statesmen relied heavily on envoys and expeditions to produce knowledge of the world. John Quincy Adams developed his knowledge of Latin America from three principle sources: John Adams (his father), Thomas Jefferson, and reports from US agents in Latin America (Schoultz 1998, 6). Schoultz recounts that the senior John Adams travelled with his son from Spain to France in 1780. Upon arriving in France the senior Adams wrote, "never was a Captive escaped from Prison more delighted than I was, for every Thing here was clean, sweet and comfortable in Comparison of any Thing We had found in any part of Spain" (Schoultz 1998, 5). His son, 12 years old at the time, showed similar disdain for Spaniards, "they are lazy, dirty, nasty and in short I can compare them to nothing but a parcel of hogs" (Schoultz, 5). The young Adams continues to bemoan Spain's "filthy lodgings" and "repressive Catholicism" (Schoultz, 5). His early exposure to Spain reflects shifting trends of the time that denounce Spain and Portugal to elevate France and England (Mignolo 2005). Later, in 1784 and 1785, John Quincy Adams spent time with Thomas Jefferson in Paris. Adams enjoyed Jefferson's company, and regarded him as a friend thereafter. Jefferson would later conclude that Spain should act only to keep peace among its colonies until "their emancipation from their priests, and advancement in information, shall prepare them for complete independence" (Schoultz 1998, 6). But by 1811, a grown John Quincy Adams would write to his father, "The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be people by one *nation*, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs" (Stephanson 1995, 58). These two ideas reflect a divergence in American thought. One would portray Spanish American colonies as yet unfit for self-rule, while the other would see them reconquered under one nation.

Lars Schoultz recounts in his book *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America* that in 1817 President James Monroe appointed John Graham and Caesar Augustus Rodney to gather new information on Latin America. Then Secretary of State John Quincy Adams added a third member to the envoy, Theodorick Bland. The three men left for Buenos Aires in 1818 and upon returning two or so months later. Each filed his own report. Rodney looked upon the Argentines favorably, Graham somewhat less so, and Bland complained about the whole trip. Adams dismissed the first two reports, preferring instead Bland's report for his "more solid information, and more deep and comprehensive reflection, than all the rest put together" (Schoultz 1998, 8).

By the time John Quincy Adams drafted the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, a fairly pervasive idea of Latin America had taken shape in the highest echelons of US government: that Latin Americans are indolent, undisciplined, and generally unfit for self-rule. This sentiment, perhaps manifested in the general tone of the Monroe Doctrine, namely a tone that discourages further European colonization west of the Atlantic. Monroe read to Congress, "But with the Governments who have declared their independence and maintain it, and whose independence we have, on great consideration and on just principles, acknowledged, we could not view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controlling in any other manner their *destiny*, by any European power in any other light than as the *manifestation* of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States" (Monroe Doctrine 1823, my emphasis). He continues with fervor:

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It is impossible that the allied powers should extend their political system to any portion of either continent without endangering our peace and happiness; nor can anyone believe that our southern brethren, if left to themselves, would adopt it of their own accord. It is equally impossible, therefore, that we should behold such interposition in any form with indifference (Monroe Doctrine 1823).[1]

Monroe projects an anti-colonial fervor throughout his declaration, ardently discouraging European powers from further interference in the Americas. He goes so far as to warn them to yield should their colonies declare independence. His tone is unsurprising considering the recent US war for independence. But at least two tacit assumptions belie Monroe's declaration, which would have considerable impacts upon US foreign policy for the next 200 or so years. First is the matter of who can threaten the United States. The US emissary reports concerning then current Spanish American colonies produced little knowledge of coherent or sufficiently advanced peoples organized well enough to threaten the United States. Coupled with Monroe's assertion that only European incursions west of the Atlantic merit comment, the doctrine measurably affirms knowledge that Southern Americans, by and large, are incapable of threatening and therefore inferior to the United States and are little more than undisciplined children under US parenting.

Second is the implication that the "southern brethren" would, "if left to themselves" surely adopt a representative political system, as opposed to a monarchic one. Here the doctrine ascribes the Spanish colonies an equal status insofar as they exist on the same developmental timeline. "Southern brethren" indicates a feeling of solidarity with those who live under colonialism, but who have yet to experience and truly know a liberty and enterprise like that of the United States. Monroe writes as if the political system in the United States has surpassed primitive political systems, and that they act in a manner far more advanced in politics and morality by nature of their commitments to self-determination for their citizenry.

About a decade later, Michel Chevalier, born in France in 1806, lived in the United States from 1833 to 1835. He visited Mexico and Cuba at the end of his stay there and published a series of letters in 1836 in which he first assigned the Spanish Americas a quality of Latinidad. His prescription extends a general understanding of two Europes, one Tuetonic and Protestant, the other Latin and Catholic.

The two branches, Latin and German, reproduced themselves in the New World. South America is, like Meridian Europe, Catholic and Latin. North America belongs to a population that is Protestant and Anglo-Saxon...The Spanish American seems to be nothing other than an impotent race without future, unless it receives a wave of rich and new blood coming from the North, or from the East (Mignolo, 77-78, quoting Chevalier, who uses East to refer to Europe).

Chevalier constituted difference between North and South America as natural projection of the same differences between Northern and Southern Europe. France, England, and Germany greatly marginalized the Iberian Peninsula, and in that constituted difference reside imperial relations of power as well as new imperial contentions between the Anglo-Saxon (English and German), Latin (now read as French), and Slav Europes. The projection of Latin Europe onto South America rendered it, by nature of its ownership by the barbarous Spain, destined to wither and falter *unless* France, the rising power of Latin Europe, took a leading role in the continued cultivation of Spanish American colonies (Mignolo 2005, 79). The hemisphere was henceforth called Latin America, a name that not only essentializes a vast geographic swath of land but also reflects European imperialist ambitions.

I mention these European caveats because of the time spent in France by Thomas Jefferson, who wrote sympathetically for those under Spanish colonial duress yet conversely viewed them as unfit for self-rule. These projections coincided with a growing opposition between nature and culture, a difference touted by the likes of Georges comte de Buffon and Hegel, and even Thomas Jefferson. In his preface to *The Idea of Latin America*, Walter Mignolo traces the development of these two ideas. Nature became reserved for God's creations while culture came to indicate cultivation and growth, and in some ways a mastery of nature. Culture soon replaced religion as a category for boxing different communities, paving the road to national identities, which could then be leveraged to describe identities of other nations, rendering them all, essentially, knowable. Nation-states became homogenous entities, and imperial powers drew up measuring sticks with which to value Other peoples. Civilization came to mark the cultures of Western Europe and the United States, who devalued other homogeneously knowable

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nations as full of culture but lacking the necessary requirements for civilization (Mignolo 2005, xvii). The proliferation of these discourses allowed European and US statesmen and their emissaries to name cultures and measure them diachronically using themselves as a standard (Mudimbe 1988). I mean to suggest by articulating both the conceptions of cultures and nation-states, and the close contact shared between US statesmen and European ideals that Eurocentric notions of self, modernity, and civilization not only survived in nineteenth century United States, but that they blossomed in quite their own way.

Keeping these discourses in mind, I want to turn to a moment of John Quincy Adams' time as president in 1825, when Spain vacated Mexico and US citizens moved in great numbers to the Mexican state of Texas. Mexico originally encouraged this migration and offered incentives to new settlers. By 1836 US settlers numbered so highly that they seceded from Mexico and established a de facto republic of Texas (Schultz 1998, 22). The new republic's independence would prove untenable in the long run and in 1845 Texas joined the United States. Two major trends allowed for the annexation: intense racial anxieties and strong currents of Manifest Destiny (1998, 26). To vehemently argue in favor Texas annexation, Senator Robert Walker, from Mississippi, wrote in the *Washington Globe* that if blacks were emancipated *without* annexing Texas, then

[T]he poor-house and the jail, the asylums of the deaf and dumb, the blind, the idiot and insane, would be filled to overflowing, if, indeed, any asylum could be afforded to the millions of the negro race whom wretchedness and crime would drive to despair and madness...As the number of free blacks augmented in the slaveholding states, they would be diffused gradually through Texas into Mexico, and Central and Southern America, where nine-tenths of their present population are already of the colored races, and where, from their vast preponderance in number, they are not a degraded caste, but upon a footing, not merely of legal, but what is far more important, of actual equality with the rest of the population (Schultz 1998, 26).

This argument was convincing for race conscious northerners who had no desire to accommodate freed slaves, even if they promoted the abolition of slavery, and the annexation of Texas would allow southern slave holding states to maintain a competitive balance with the North in Congress. Texas entered the Union in December of 1845 (Schultz 1998, 25).

In 1846, James Polk ordered US military soldiers to occupy a contested territory where Texas bordered Mexico. The Mexican military responded in kind with a defensive attack on the US soldiers, after which President Polk declared war with his eyes clearly set on westward territorial expansion. Divine providence endowed the US a responsibility to spread across the continent, but *only insofar as the United States could extinguish or assimilate savage populations*. Expansionism by divine providence flourished in popularity until US statesmen addressed the question of assimilating Mexicans into their Union. John C. Calhoun argued that "Ours, sir, is the Government of a white race. The greatest misfortunes of Spanish America are to be traced to the fatal error of placing these colored races on an equality with the white race" (Schultz, 36). This was the case to such an extent that the United States political parties reached a consensus (a rarity then, as now): "whatever the outcome...might be, the land to be taken from Mexico should be as devoid of Mexicans as possible" (Schultz 33).

A few months before that, on December 27, 1845 John O'Sullivan (who supported Polk) wrote of "the right for our *manifest destiny* to overspread and to possess the whole continent which providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self government" (Stephanson 1995, 42, Stephanson's emphasis). The right of destiny or providence was used for two opposing ends in the 1840s: to promote or oppose US expansion. Either expansion would help the "great experiment of liberty" grow, or else it would spread sinful slavocracy. Other times arguments invoked necessary rough patches to bring to fruition promises of advanced civilization. But more frequently claims of a glorious plan that "Mexico will ultimately fall a political prey, not to force, but to a superior population, insensibly oozing into her territories, changing her customs, and out-loving, out-trading, exterminating her weaker brook, we regard with as much certainty as we do the final extinction of the Indian races, to which the mass of the Mexican population seem very little superior; and we have no reason to doubt that this country will not have double its three centuries of existence, before South America will speak the English tongue and submit to the civilization, laws and religion of the Anglo-Saxon race" (Stephanson, 57, quoting Reverend H.W. Bellows). With few exceptions, those who opposed expansion did so with an explicit understanding that expanding into

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Mexican territories would sully the purity of the white race that made liberty an achievable enterprise. And those who promoted expansion foresaw a whitening of populations that could ultimately destroy inferior races and allow the natural rulers of the land, white Anglo Saxons, to spread free enterprise.

The United States expanded by divine providence, read as a *natural* right to spread liberty and free enterprise, and it did so by removing people from land *and* land from people whose cultures restrained them to *natural* and primitive states. The opposition between natural right and state of nature interrupt the sorts of narratives that I've reproduced above in the Monroe Doctrine, the annexation of Texas, and the Mexican American War. How could nature designate primitiveness *at the same time* that it provides an impetus for fulfilling natural (destinarian) prophecies? The answer might lie with V.Y. Mudimbe's conclusions in *The Invention of Africa*, in which he traces an epistemological transition near the beginning of the nineteenth century that rendered time as a transcendental concept, which allowed for events to happen *in* and *over* time. This transcendental allowed US statesmen to know themselves as the most advanced diachronic manifestation of humanity. And time as a concept contributed to an essential condition of possibility for history to appear as a knowable series of progressive events leading to the present. Looking far away in time through history allowed the past to be known as an Other, which allowed anthropological discourses to look far away in space using the historical Other as a measure of the geographic Other. Jefferson's and Adams' tones of progressivism, the idea that *once* their "southern brethren" shake off their priests reflects their conceptions of themselves as having already done so. This dual conception of the diachronic (history) and synchronic (anthropology) allowed for those in the present to be constituted as an Other by expansionary powers by *nature* of their development beyond living in a *natural* state (Mudimbe 1988, see conclusion).

By the 1840s, the rhetoric producing Texas and Mexico in the 1820s was reconstituted with racial overtones; what was once a divide between Anglo Saxon Protestants, those destined to naturally inhabit the whole continent of North America, and the Latin Catholics, those held back by their priests from achieving liberty, became a divide between a biologically superior white race in the north that could not under any circumstances accommodate colored races in the south (and even within the north). The manifestations from religious backwardness to racial inferiority underscored a latent understanding of the Other as fundamentally different and less progressed, that allowed for the continuation of an age of unprecedented territorial expansion as far west as the Pacific Ocean (Said 1978, 206). By bringing together Roitman's account of modernity and history with Mudimbe's conceptions of diachronicity and synchronicity, I have tried to account for some of the epistemological conditions that birthed US expansionism in the nineteenth century. When John Quincy Adams conceived of his self as having achieved modernity's prescription of liberty and self-determination, he endowed himself with a right to assess those without liberty as inferior and unfit for self-determination. I argued above that these ideas rested upon a secularization of the state that detached religious beliefs from policy, *and* a religious and moral devotion that endowed US men with a divine right to land (as affirmed by their secular liberties). In the 1840s this divine providence was reconstituted within the discourse of racial hierarchies and slavery and, although arguments were leveraged for and against expansionism, and no point were the fundamental principles guiding the United States contested.

The brevity of this paper mandated that I exclude other encounters with Latin America and racial tensions in the United States. I intended to explore texts and historical figures that represented pervasive narratives of modernity, history, and primitiveness, and in doing so I excluded narratives of resistance that countered expansionism by other means. In some senses, by my exclusion of those voices that would have offered resistance, this paper represents a continuation of the colonial project. The result may be so, but my intention was to borrow from groundbreaking post-colonial thinkers who "wrote back" against colonial powers. In this paper, then, I have begun to ask where one might begin to unthink United States hegemony, and how one might write back using the concepts developed by Said and Mudimbe. It is a probing, more than anything else, for tracing a genealogy of thought that would produce the ideas of the United States and Latin America together and perhaps render a future, otherwise.

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[1] The short speech concerns itself primarily with Spain and Spanish colonies, for which John Quincy Adams has expressed considerable distaste.

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