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Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala (review)

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account, each “success” was followed by government backtracking and the need for further mobilization. In contrast, protest movements in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina forced neoliberal governments from power. Furthermore, these nations have made much more progress in undoing neoliberalism, especially during the period covered by Almeida (before Funes was elected in 2009).

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Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala. By Diane M. Nelson. Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. xxxi, 403. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$94.95 cloth; \$25.95 paper.

Diane M. Nelson’s elaborate and exceedingly erudite description of developments in Guatemala cover the period from the termination of the Civil War (ca. 1996) to the end of the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) in 2005. Nelson’s postmodern framework is obvious throughout, as she adopts an incredibly large number of tropes and metaphors to describe and interpret the complicated history of this period. Her elaborate account provides detailed information on important persons, events, and diverse social units, including Maya communities, NGOs, political parties and organizations, the Guatemalan state, the United States and other foreign powers. Her account of salient events that occurred during this period reveal her profound and detailed knowledge of recent history in Guatemala, and this alone makes the book invaluable for anyone interested in recent developments in that effervescent country. Each of Nelson’s eight major chapters is constructed around one or more metaphors created to cast light on postwar Guatemala. The metaphors, such as “Maya ritual celebrations,” “horror movies,” “carnivals,” “Lamarckian bio-politics,” and “audits” are complex, and Nelson brilliantly employs them as revelatory devices. It is necessary to read carefully Nelson’s elaborate interpretation of such metaphors in order to appreciate their relevance to the complex recent historical developments in Guatemala.

Professor Nelson engages in constructionism throughout this long and detailed account. The boundaries between all sociocultural categories are blurred, including gender, ethnic, and national identities that exist only through their ties to one another. She claims that her position has emerged through years of personal experiences in Guatemala, where she discovered that all identities—and basically all activities—are constantly constructed and reconstructed; boundaries are inevitably changing, even those between civil society and state. Her field experiences have caused her to adopt an only slightly stronger cultural relativistic stance than her continuing left wing activist stance. Nelson’s postmodern methodology is made clear throughout her long discourse, as she admits the pastiche of collaborators, friends, drinking partners, scholars, lovers, and soul mates, all of whom contributed in some way to her study. She is open about the eclectic nature of her methodology. She repeatedly identifies herself as a partisan “solidarity activist,” and explains that she spent much of her research time among educated Mayas and Ladinos (many of them revolutionaries), and relied heavily on contacts made through (solidarity) friends and also in

informal settings like movies, bars and restaurants. She feels constrained to admit that she neither attempted to synthesize a detailed ethnography of Guatemala as a whole nor any group within Guatemala. Nevertheless, she repeatedly returns to her study of the K'iche' community of Joyabaj. Certainly there is no attempt in this book to write an in-depth ethnography of that community.

As a highly intelligent postmodern ethnographer, Nelson dwells long and anxiously on her reflections about the role she played in doing ethnography in Guatemala. She adopts a fluidary strategy, where the focus is on relationships and ambiguous identities rather than fixed identities and positions. She consistently focuses on her own ambivalent identity as solidarist partisan in favor of the "people" vs. the state and U.S. imperialism. Nevertheless, she admits to personal uneasiness from having to disagree with her solidary friends on some points. Furthermore, she confesses that her research was partly done out of the pleasure derived from it, and the advantages resulting from her powerful gringa status (a "Lizard Queen"), although she has learned from the assassination of friends that gringa bodies are not invulnerable in Guatemala!

On a more personal and practical level, I would argue that Nelson's type of postmodernism tends to undercut some of the important legitimacy that ethnography and anthropology have enjoyed in the social sciences, a legitimacy that in times of lagging financial support and sharp political divisions can be of considerable service to the discipline. Scholars in the Third World have particularly called attention to this problem, suggesting that the abandonment of the scientific paradigm seems to correlate with their own entry into a more favorable position in the scholarly world, and that this discursive trend makes it harder for them to validate their own academic claims and struggle for recognition.

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Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934-1957. By Matthew J. Smith. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. xi, 296. Table. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$59.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Matthew J. Smith's engaging study of Haitian political change from the end of the U.S. occupation in 1934 to the beginning of the Duvalier regime in 1957 is both a welcome contribution to an overlooked period in Haitian history and an important contribution to understanding interactions between class-based and race-based political ideologies in the Caribbean and Latin America. Building on the work of David Nicholls, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and others who have framed questions of color and class, state and civil society, Smith offers a new perspective grounded in the complex interactions of political movements, radical intellectuals, charismatic personalities, state repression, and foreign influences in the postoccupation period. His work could usefully be read, alongside other studies of black radicalism in the early to mid-twentieth century, as a recovery of its significance even in the face of bitter defeats.