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*Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature* by Victoria Emma  
Pagán (review)

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**Victoria Emma Pagán.** *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature.* Austin: U of Texas P, 2012. 182 pp.

We live in an age of conspiracy theories: birthers, truthers, climate deniers. The believers in these theories represent large groups of American citizens, each armed with their own media outlets, their own “experts,” their own “information,” and their own political organizations. Indeed, as I read the present book, we were just learning that one of the Boston Marathon bombers, Tamerlan Tzarnaev (an actual conspirator), was a follower of Alex Jones’ website, Infowars.com: a one-stop shop for far right conspiracy theories and paranoia of all descriptions ([www.salon.com/2013/04/23/tamerlan\\_tzarnaev\\_was\\_an\\_alex\\_jones\\_fan/](http://www.salon.com/2013/04/23/tamerlan_tzarnaev_was_an_alex_jones_fan/)). Ironically, less than two weeks after the bombings, Jones had already posted the webcast, “All Evidence Points to Bombing Being Staged” ([www.infowars.com/feds-admit-prior-knowledge-and-terror-listings-for-boston-bombing-suspect/](http://www.infowars.com/feds-admit-prior-knowledge-and-terror-listings-for-boston-bombing-suspect/)). Pagán’s book makes the salutary point that conspiracies and conspiracy theorists, like the poor, have always been with us. Under current political and media conditions in the United States, however, it has perhaps never been more urgent to understand both the history and the theory of conspiracies and conspiracy theorists. Pagán’s book is timely indeed.

Any student of Roman history could be pardoned for a well-developed sense of the conspiratorial as an actor on the political stage. In addition to the Catilinarian conspiracy thwarted by Cicero, the assassination of Julius Caesar, the machinations of the first and second triumvirates to control and ultimately undermine the republic, and a long list of emperors who died in office but not in their beds, there is the simple fact that even in the golden age of the republic Roman politics was a game played largely by a small number of senatorial families. The alliances they made, the vendettas they pursued, and the vast networks of patronage they controlled did not lend themselves to an open and transparent diffusion power and information. The Roman republic, in many ways, can be viewed as a series of interlocked and often opposed conspiracies, whose very opacity generated a culture of suspicion and mistrust in which conspiracy theories, both founded and not, thrived. Pagán’s book offers a clear-sighted and highly readable account of how these conspiracies and their associated paranoias were portrayed, reinforced, and occasionally debunked in the literature of the late republic and early empire.

*Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature* opens with a sustained attempt to theorize “conspiracism.” Conspiracy theories are products of conjecture. They represent a response to an epistemological crisis and aporia. Conspiracy theories make the world make sense. They are cogent (if not always coherent) responses to moments of cognitive incapacity or dissonance. Citing the social psychologist, Serge Moscovici, Pagán argues that conspiracy theories not only develop a plausible chain of causality, as does any narrative, but they create and sustain individual identities and social values. A man is elected president. He is not white. He is highly educated and articulate. He

represents the aspirations of a series of groups who have been marginalized in society and who by definition can be neither white nor speakers of truth. Therefore, he cannot be president. He must be a fraud. He must not be a citizen. And look, here's the evidence: his father was a foreign political radical. If we turn now to Juvenal's satires, we can recreate this same line of reasoning. A man has become prominent in Roman society, having close connections with aristocratic families and even the emperor himself. He is Greek. He is highly educated and articulate. He represents the aspirations of a series of groups who have been marginalized in society and who by definition can be neither Roman nor speakers of truth. Therefore, he cannot be a Roman aristocrat. He must be a fraud. He must not be a citizen. And look, here's the evidence: his father was a slave. Of course, while Juvenal fully intends to be outlandish, and his text is often self-aware of its own hyperbolic, self-deconstructing nature, in a way Alex Jones and Glenn Beck can never be, nonetheless his text is only receivable, his complaint only intelligible in light of the social discourses it stylizes and parodies. As Pagán shows us, Juvenalian satire offers us a primer on how to read the news.

Chapter One, "Conspiracy Theory in Action," shows the way in which conspiracy theory was a routine way of organizing limited information in Roman narratives. In Cicero's Verrine orations the corrupt governor of Sicily is portrayed as manufacturing and profiting from slave conspiracies. The evidence is weak, but Cicero produces a powerful narrative based on Verres' supposed greed, a conspiracy theory to account for the conspiracies. In Terrence's *Mother-in-Law*, a series of characters are shown both actually conspiring and engaging in unfounded conjecture. Lastly, the slave revolts, leading up to and including that of Spartacus, are narrated as a series of conspiracies by ancient historians.

Chapter Two, "Juvenal and Blame" investigates the dynamics of Juvenal's famed xenophobia. Satire by definition engages in caricature and parody. Yet who and what are acceptable targets tell a lot about how a society defines both itself and the other. The other is always a moment of opacity. The other is precisely whom we must suspect of conspiring against the traditional values of the same. From the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to Donald Trump's rantings about fake birth certificates, the other is under suspicion.

Chapter Three, "Tacitus and Punishment" examines the question of how do we punish those suspected of conspiracy. Conspiracies are by definition secret and only come to light when they are either successful or betrayed. What punishment, then, fits a crime that has not yet occurred, but which if it occurs, we may no longer be able to punish it at all. To quote one of this century's great conspiracy theorists, Condoleezza Rice, "we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."

Chapter Four "Suetonius and Suspicion" closes the book with a bravura reading of conspiracy from the imperial perspective. If you are an emperor, by definition, people are plotting to kill you. What, then, is a reasonable level of suspicion? When does prudence become paranoia? When does our fear of

what Donald Rumsfeld termed “unknown unknowns” produce the madness of a Caligula? Pagán offers a careful reading of Suetonius’s *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* and makes a convincing case that they should be read as a unified meditation on power and suspicion.

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**Camilla Fojas and Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr.** *Transnational Crossroads: Remapping the Americas and the Pacific*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2012. 504 pp.

In the discourses on transnationalism, “crossroads” has taken its place alongside (if not supplanted) “borderlands” as a mobile metaphor for the kinds of work that people in cultural studies, American studies, and ethnic studies do. Offering a locus for the intersection of diverse paths (whether historical, cultural, or disciplinary), “crossroads” suggests a meeting place—and, potentially, a new direction. As such it provides an apt metaphor for Camilla Fojas and Rudy Guevarra’s collection, *Transnational Crossroads: Remapping the Americas and the Pacific*. Situating the book as part of a larger intervention into exceptionalism in American Studies, the editors open up the spaces of “America”—now configured not as a center but as a junction for the interactions of diverse Caribbean, Asian, Pacific, and “American” (North and South) cultures, peoples, histories, economies, and politics. Like any diverse anthology, *Transnational Crossroads* will draw readers interested in just one of its various threads—Hawaiian nationalism or comparative labour history or literary studies—but those who read it in its entirety will be treated to a geographically and disciplinarily vertiginous reading experience, as, to invoke a few examples, island locales, from Puerto Rico to the Philippines to Hawaii, come together in a history of American imperialism (Fojas); *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* illuminates a history of disenfranchisement (Arvin); and identities get hybridized and coopted in cyberspace (ho’omanawanui).

The book is divided into four sections—“The End of Empire”; “Comparative Racialization”; “The American Pacific”; and “Crossroads of American Migration”—though the concerns in different sections are overlapping, organized less by geography or history or disciplinary approach than by general thematic concern. The logic of these pairings is not always clearly marked, but the juxtapositions produce some fascinating resonances, as in the apt pairing of Jane Yamashiro and Hugo Córdova Quero’s comparative analysis of Japanese Brazilian and Japanese American immigrants in Japan with Ryan Masaaki Yokota’s account of the Peruvian Nisei in Los Angeles. Reading such essays alongside each other is a useful reminder that migration goes both ways, producing experiences that are as diverse as they are resonant. Such comparative work is also contained within the essays, as in