

*The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity.* By RALPH BAUER.  
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Some of what postcolonial scholarship has learned about how the empire “writes back” Ralph Bauer deploys here in a study of how the Spanish and English empires wrote to and about themselves. This excellent book is a distinguished addition to the comparative studies that have been one strength of the Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture series. Bauer considers the transatlantic empires of Spain and England during the three centuries in which their colonies were founded and grew to the point of redefinition as autonomous nations, with attention to their centers and peripheries. He compares imperial systems and traces common threads of mercantilist economics and “New Science.” How was knowledge produced and deployed? What genres structured written discourse? In particular, how did figures on the peripheries participate as writers in the conversation about empire? Lurking throughout the book are an old story and some familiar characters: plucky settlers and their offspring struggling to find their voices as colonial subjects. Bauer’s thorough renovation of this topos of New World creole narrative, however, is something of a tour de force. It brings to bear not only postcolonial theory but also accounts of early modern epistemology and the foundations of modern historiography, consideration of recent decades of work on the formation of nation states and modern subjectivities, and scholarship on the history of printing. Throughout, Bauer draws on scholarly writings in English and Spanish. Anyone interested in the settler/creole subject in the Americas will find this book exciting and richly informative.

Bauer reads examples of colonial narrative in terms of their participation in the structuring power struggles of the Spanish and British New World empires. He summarizes the struggle, in political and economic terms, as the rise of mercantilism: “Whereas the first conquests and colonizations of the New World had largely depended on private initiative, with the European monarchies ready to grant individuals quasi-feudal contractual relationships as incentives, the monarchies, in a ‘second conquest,’ subsequently attempted to centralize the political administration over the newly conquered territories in order to channel the economic profits . . . in ways most profitable to the imperial metropole” (3).

Part and parcel of this struggle “was the question of how knowledge could be centrally produced and controlled” (3) in an expanding imperial system spanning the Atlantic Ocean and three continents, where the reporters of New World knowledge acted at great geographic and cultural distances from the centers. Though reportage from the Americas “unleashed an unprecedented inflation in the value of empirical forms of knowledge,” an “epistemic mercantilism” evolved based on “a division of intellectual labor between imperial peripheries and centers” (3), with colonial subjects supplying raw facts that were theorized and ordered at the center. Bauer’s discussions of particular texts deal with “the poetics of this mercantilist production of knowledge” (3–4), especially creole reactions to their own effacement as colonial subjects within such a system. Bauer’s command of the scholarship on this subject is impressive, and his deployment of these ideas results in a richly historicized poetics of colonial creole writing. His writers are alive in their own time. This prospect is compelling for anyone who wants to take seriously the subject position and voice of the colonial, reclaimed from long service in the cause of founding narratives of New World nation states.

The book is structured as what Bauer calls a collection of “exemplary case studies” (29), arranged chronologically. The first and second chapters, for example, are focused respectively on Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative of shipwreck and captivity and Samuel Purchas’s compilations of travel

narratives. These writings offer views from opposite sides of the power struggle at the heart of the early modern knowledge economy. De Vaca proffers information stemming from direct observation, and Purchas exemplifies the ordering and synthesizing role of the editor and historian in this “divided labor” (83) model of New Science and seventeenth-century historiography. But as elsewhere in the book, Bauer’s approach is to demonstrate that, even as de Vaca’s account of Native American cultures has seemed to some more objective and “factual” (31) than those of his contemporaries, his narrative ought properly to be understood as “complicit with and foundational in a gradual transformation of Spanish imperialist policy from violent to ‘peaceful conquest’” (33). Bauer argues: “What’s at stake in Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relación* . . . is not so much a conflict between European and (Native) American cultures and ways of knowing—between a European self and an American other—but rather a conflict between two ideas of empire and an epistemic conflict between two ideas of knowledge as they arose in the geopolitical dialectic between European expansionism and centralizing monarchy” (33–34).

Bauer’s approach to de Vaca positions his story within the imperial discourses of the Spanish court. Bauer does not forget that de Vaca actually experienced shipwreck and walked all the way from Florida to Mexico. Yet his reading of the narrative derives more from the circumstances of its composition, including de Vaca’s own sophisticated understanding of the court context to which the narrative was addressed, and of the competing, privileged accounts of imperial history originating from the *cronista mayor*, the official court historian. Thus de Vaca does not so much assert himself as an authority based on his unique experience as attempt to position himself in an advantageous relation to the increasingly centralized discourse of neutral, natural knowledge flowing from the metropole.

The centralizing monarch in the case of Purchas was James I, and Bauer shows how what has seemed to some like heavy-handed editing can be understood as Purchas’s deployment of New Science in a way that coincided with the Crown’s desire to increase its administrative control over colonies. Knowledge production and profit production were subjected to a division of labor between imperial periphery and center. Purchas’s editorialized compilations expressed this pattern of imposing “structure” from the center on “materials” (88) from the periphery. Subsequent chapters deal with captivity narratives by Francisco Núñez de Pineda y Bascuñán, Mary White Rowlandson, and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora; William Bird; Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur; and Alonso Carrió de la Vandra’s *El Lazarillo de ciegos caminantes* [A Guide for Inexperienced Travelers]. One comes away with a vital sense of the engagement of each writer with the discourses of his or her day.

Bauer’s work builds on the intertextualizing gestures of New Historicism, but goes further, offering a thoroughly developed argument about the shaping policies and ideas of the colonial period. It also brings to bear the best ideas of postcolonial theory, deployed with a level of historical and textual detail that altogether avoids any sense of a programmatic application. This rich and accomplished study is a model of thinking about the mentalities of the transatlantic colonial empires.