

DISGUST AS REDEMPTIVE ARTICULATION: BRITISH INTERWAR WRITERS IN MEXICO

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The history of British travel to Mexico is a long one, although it has for the most part remained unobserved or overshadowed by American literary production. Dewey Wayne Gunn reminds us in *American and British Writers in Mexico: 1556-1973* that “Few of the earliest American or British visitors to Mexico were primarily authors” (3). The first voyagers to the New World were either explorers or merchants. The earliest published British travel narrative to what would be Mexico is *The Principall Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (Gunn, *ABWM* 3-5). *Principall* is made up of eight different accounts by John Hawkin’s unfortunate crew when they explored the Gulf of Mexico in 1568.¹ In more modern times, travelers to Mexico hold the romantic desire that Mexican primitivism might be the solution to social and economic ills (Gunn, *ABWM* 147).

Primitivism is generally thought of as the value in literature and/or art in the unsophisticated and simple. This view is, of course, stained with colonialist and Eurocentric modes of thought. Andrezej Gašiorek identifies the rise of primitivist discourse with the rise of imperialist apologist rhetoric in the late nineteenth century: “At a time when Europe had all but destroyed itself, the threat to its integrity and future was projected onto ‘alien’ peoples and societies” (92). Still, the primitivism of, say, D.H. Lawrence, who “defended an intuitionism that informed his mythopoetic art” was markedly different from Wyndham Lewis’s model and use of primitivism (Gašiorek 94). Primitivism is further complicated by the way in which it operates. In literature, primitivism can make it seem as if criticism is coming in from the outside (the other) while it is actually coming from an insider (the author). Primitivism tends to minimize the impact of variables

¹ By the early 1970s Gunn had calculated that about 600 travel journals, 450 novels and short stories had been written about Mexico. Between 1928 and 1942 alone there were more than 80 travel journals about Mexico. One can only guess at the number now (Gunn, *ABWM* ix, 147).

and nuances of European cultures and distilled the essence of what might have gone wrong in the twentieth century.

Mexico was never a British colony. It was instead a satellite of Spain and then France, two of Britain's earliest rivals. Although Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821 it would have to fight for its freedom against France in 1862. Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer point out in *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History 1910-1989* that in the early 20th century Mexico was turning to be one of the top three oil producers in the world (14). By the 1930s foreign companies had invested millions of pounds and dollars into a very lucrative oil business.² Unfortunately, the wealth produced from coal, industrial metals, and the oil industry did not go to advancing the country as a whole. The Mexican Revolution therefore did not come out of economic underdevelopment but economic potential. The Revolution itself and the numerous counter-revolutionary movements that followed tested how the socialist ideals of the 1917 Constitution were to play out on the ground.

My project tries to understand what Mexico meant to late British modernists and why they traveled there. On the one hand, modernism's aesthetic techniques (such as ambiguity, dense temporality, and monumentalism) are evident in their fictional and nonfictional texts on Mexico. And yet Graham Greene, Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, and Evelyn Waugh are "late" modernists in the sense that their form and content is not solely mobilized to create an elite literature—a phase in modernism which peaked in 1921-24—but to engage fully in the political realities brought on by the rise of totalitarianisms in the 1930s. Mexico is the pallet on which they cast their anxieties about modernity but it is also the force that paints over some of their ideas of "race," government, and the function of the novel as they saw it. The mystical, religious, and morbid facets of Mexico, partly projected and partly found by the four interwar writers named above, are the terms they used to think through the problems brought on by globalization, the British Empire, and modernity.

What were *Mornings in Mexico* (1927) by Lawrence, *Beyond the Mexique Bay* (1934) by Huxley, *The Lawless Roads*³ (1938) by Greene, and *Robbery Under Law: the Mexican Object Lesson*⁴ (1939) by Waugh trying to convey? Mexican modernists are a subset of late British modernists who traveled to and wrote about Mexico. I

² Evelyn Waugh was sponsored by Lord Cowdray, the owner of Mexican Eagle Petroleum Company, to investigate the nationalization of oil in Mexico.

³ *The Lawless Roads* was printed as *Another Mexico* in the United States.

⁴ *Mexico: An Object Lesson* was the American title.

argue that Mexico was a focus for this set of interwar authors partly because of the modernist conception of its own relation to culture and language. Mexican modernists went to Mexico to find a sense of place and wholeness. Embedded in this project too is the need to find non-rational epistemological and ontological models.

George Woodcock in an article published in 1956, "Mexico and the English Novelist," Ronald G. Walker and Douglas W. Veitch in 1978 with their monographs, are so far the only three writers who focus primarily on the Mexican-inspired literary production by British authors. Although in their time they contributed significantly to the topic of British-Mexican cultural interaction, their work is dated. The impression that Woodcock gets from the Mexican modernists is that Mexico is an Inferno, "the land of hatred and violence which is encapsulated for Europeans in the story of Maximilian and Carlotta, that tragedy of enlightened good-will destroyed in the maelstrom of political passions" ("Mexico" 22). The specificity of Mexican political motivations, of its culture and history, even of the fact that Maximilian and Carlotta imposed their rule upon a freed Mexican state, all these become obliterated in a tragedy ("for Europeans") and romantic imagery ("maelstrom"). Walker takes a step forward to then take two steps back. "For the foreigner," he challenges, "who feels threatened by violence at the hands of the descendants of the Aztecs—and who thinks of the threat in these terms—is reacting not so much to contemporary historical actuality as to the Mexican mystique" (Walker 17). The Aztecs, he seems to imply, are by far not the only Mexican civilization that existed before the Spanish. But the *je ne sais quoi* of Mexico once again tends to obscure more material, and alas prosaic, reasons for their trip to Mexico: it was cheaper to live in Mexico than in Europe. Mexico was and continues to be for critics a land of extremes. While I do not differ with some of their conclusions, especially about the authors' obsession about the fate of England, there are other aspects of Mexican modernists' works that have not been fully mapped out.

The main interest of the Mexican modernists is in finding a model in Mexico. By this I do not mean that they found a positive model in Mexico: "There is nothing, except ourselves, to stop our own countries becoming like Mexico," Waugh writes in the postscript to *Robbery* (279). Yet, their fictional texts, before and after their voyage into Mexico, are microcosms of the world they envision. The Mexican modernists are looking for different, perhaps new, perhaps forgotten epistemological and ontological models in Mexico—a country where "Anything may happen there; almost everything has happened there" (Waugh 272). Mexico is the post-apocalypse, where the people have

become a mob of individuals. Their protagonists or the ideas that come from the strife in their works, serve as a model of alternative living. I do use the word "alternative" carefully. In the way that Mexican modernists see it, people are either blind or unwilling to break the chains of platitudinal servitude to an inconsequential idea of the self. Mexicans have no need to know themselves. Europeans, by contrast, know about a self that is not actualized. Or so runs the familiar story.

What was the Mexico that met these writers? It was the Mexico of the Indian, of the mestizo, and a set of beings who were both prescribed and mysterious. It becomes quickly apparent in the travel journals that even though Mexicans were not colonized by the British, the language used for non-European others was portable. Colonial discourse, for Homi Bhabha, "produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an other and yet entirely knowable and visible" (101). Otherness/strangeness by definition is at a limit of knowledge, and at the same time it is imbued with whole histories of knowledge. This gap of the unreadable is good for Bhabha and, eventually, for the Mexican modernists, "The effect of cultural incommensurability is that it takes as beyond the merely formal criterion of rationality, and points us towards the human activity of articulation which gives value to rationality its sense" (Bhabha 177). Incommensurability manifests itself in what is not readable. Incommensurability necessitates the other, and the interaction with the other who has both valid and foreign ways of thinking, acting, and being than one/itself. Articulation, the opening up of conversation, of the circulation of ideas between two entities, gives reason its sense. I believe that Bhabha here is being technical: rationality does not necessarily have sense built into the system. Ultimately all the Mexican modernists were to rely upon rationality being the active ingredient of some kind of hope, but the recipe did call for a healthy and creative amount of nonsense.

In a relatively older wave of modernism, the untranslatable was the landscape. While the Mexican landscape is the only aspect of the travel journals that critics have found redeemable, I want to argue that the map of negative affect is much more valuable to us today. While still in Mexico City Waugh thinks about the way in which some aspects of European and Revolutionary culture have been normalized in the capital. And yet, the tension between both is bubbling underneath the surface: "It is doubtful how much humankind can become properly at ease in this climate; perhaps one may attribute to it a great part of the otherwise unaccountable alternations of listlessness and violence that have made Mexican history" (21). Waugh is not the only one who cannot "account" for the violence in Mexico. In Orizaba, Greene retells a story about the murder of a child, concluding that

the incident was part of “one of those sudden inexplicable outbursts of brutality common in Mexico” (112). Huxley and Lawrence echo this at various points in their travel journals. “That blood lust of the Aztecs, that still surviving preoccupation with death, those sudden Mexican violences—perhaps, in part at least, these are the products of the local air. Judging by my own state of mind” (Huxley 301). What is noisome about the Mexican modernists’ inability to pinpoint the origin of violence is that they are so perceptive in finding circuitous ways of equally making Europe partially responsible for and exonerated from involvement in the bursts of carnage in Mexico.

The British imperialistic machine was, though saturated, not fully on its way towards decline. India and then a slew of African protectorates were about to default from the great honor of being the provider for the empire. Mexico was the future, in that it was what their colonies would be like after independence. But it was also another kind of future, one that—due to the oil expropriation—did not let them even have the advantage of economic domination. Slavoj Žižek tries to figure out where unaccountable bursts of violence comes from in *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*; he parses out different kinds of violence: subjective violence (most visible, feels like the disruption of the “normal”), symbolic violence (language), and objective/systemic violence (in the background) (1-2). Žižek argues that “irrational” subjective violence is invisible objective violence (V 2). For Žižek, the political act renders the unthinkable thinkable. In Mexico, politics made the nearly complete evacuation of colonial financial interest not only thinkable but a reality.

In his essay “Critique of Violence,” Walter Benjamin discusses the implications of violence, law and the creation of a state:

If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying [...] if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood [...] But if the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means. (297, 300)

I hope that by now it is clear what type of violence most Europeans saw the Revolution falling under. Mexicans modernists sometimes stray from this conclusion since what is brewing in Spain and Germany does not seem markedly different than what has happened in this Central American republic. After his meeting with General Cedillo, Greene is in a car heading towards a storm: “Lightning and the gods have always been associated; terrible, majestic deliberate, stabbing impartially, it was like a criticism of human violence, the little decorated pistol holders, the absurd self-importance of killers” (LR 71).

It is hard to argue about what authors did not use but Greene's representation of human violence does not point to the *pistoleros* or to the revolutionaries, but of "killers"—unburdened by nice distinctions of ethnicity. The killers in Germany, like the killers in Mexico, have a lot to answer for.

Mexican modernists wanted to envision a new way of knowing politically in the 1930s. The drive to find new ways of knowing through the body is related to the search for another ontological model. It is now more than ever that we will go through the ugly feelings that the Mexican modernists are capable of. I argue that while we may become uncomfortable, while there is in these accounts a political and ethical ugliness, I offer here a counter-majoritarian reading because these aspects of their work is not all they do with the materials, the people, and the concepts they encounter in Mexico.

Modernists mourn their state of fragmentation, their distance from a lived (versus derivative) life. That is their stance and so their literature is riddled with the failures, the Wilcoxes, Criches, and Ramsays, but also with the possibility of being whole. After roughing the American historian, Stuart Chase, up for a while, Huxley is baffled about what the civilized man can learn from the primitive: "They can take, or at least they can try to take, the primitive's human wholeness. A primitive is forced to be whole—a complete man, trained in all the skills of the community" (259). Incredibly in Miahuatlan, Huxley is still optimistic about introducing "a salutary element of primitivism into our civilized and industrialized way of life" (257-8). Even though a civilized man "is under no external necessity to be whole," this is a state that he desires because the cost of a well-oiled civilizing machine is the individual (259, 260). These distinctions that make life dangerous are normalized in "society." At this point, Huxley is willing to contemplate some kind of conquest: Western man can "take" wholeness. "Wholeness," however, is not a quality that can be easily taken from one individual to another. What Huxley means is that civilized peoples should model their lives on the systems and relational networks of the primitive. "On the Ship," the last essay in Huxley's travelogue, does not leave the question open: "I thought once that the payment could be evaded, or at least very greatly reduced; that it was possible to make very nearly the best of both worlds. But this, I believe, was a delusion [...] We must be content to pay, and indefinitely go on paying, the irreducible price of the goods we have chosen" (314, 315). Huxley's final stance on this issue is that "we" must stand behind the collectivization of the empire to acquire more independent civil rights.

The Mexican travel journals do not end with wholeness. If anything, "Often a writer came away with extremely intricate and

ambivalent attitudes” (Gunn 255). There is a process which is begun by negative affect that complicates what could be a simple dislike of a different culture. Disgust is one of the most uncomfortable negative affects, both for the narrative personae and modern readers. There is however, a turn and a gradual recuperation from the energy spent in articulating negative effect. Ugly feelings like disgust become a platform on which to create differently circulating forms of articulation not (solely) based on Western concepts of reason and logic. Unfortunately, the literary legacies of both the travel journals and the novels produced through Mexico have only instilled and reinforced negative critique on the country. This is not a little due to the general disapprobation in England of socialism, revolution, and the utilization of violence by non-Western peoples.

As a subject, “Mexico” pushes against these British authors’ objectivity. The literary and phenomenological description of disgust becomes the platform on which this tug of war is dramatized. Lawrence’s persona in *Mornings* is candid to the point of rudeness about the repulsion that the white Anglo-American feels towards a people opposed to their doctrines: “The former feeling, of instinctive but tolerant repulsion, the feeling of most ordinary farmers and ranchers and mere individuals in the west, is quite natural, it is only honesty to admit it” (102). But this comes only after Lawrence warns his readers that: “You’ve got to de-bunk the Indian, as you’ve got to de-bunk the Cowboy. When you’ve de-bunked the Cowboy, there’s not much left. But the Indian bunk is not the Indian’s invention. It is ours” (MM 100-101). And the “white man” creates the “Indian,” Lawrence judges, because the Indian does not conform to “our” European narrative—Lawrence knows where he stands. The “normal” reaction, what Lawrence would view as the instinctual reaction, is to hate what does not agree with us. The inauthentic reaction is to idolize the Indian and believe him to be closer to some kind of ideal (again, European ideal that compensates for some of the negative effects of a capitalistic system that is quite comfortable). Exoticization and sentimentalization both shut down rather than open up communication between these cultures. This might seem ironic and even hypocritical of him to say but Lawrence is known for purposefully traveling to one extreme in order for his readers to position themselves at the other end or some more moderate side⁵—not because they wish to be better than their misguided narrator (Lawrence) but because, when it matters, the position they choose is the more viably honest one.

Across time, there is someone who invited white people to embrace their “instinctive but tolerant repulsion”:

⁵ See Sargent and Watson.

We need to say to white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. [...] Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche. By taking back your collective shadow the intracultural split will heal. And finally, tell us what you need from us. (Anzaldúa 107-108)

This passage comes from Gloria Anzaldúa's chapter on the *mestiza* or "New Consciousness" from her seminal work, *Borderlands/Fronteras*. Anzaldúa was a Chicana feminist who thought about the erased histories of pre-Columbian culture and also of matriarchal pagan societies. To the "gringo," the Chicana is the doppelganger while for the Mexican (north and south of Río Grande) the "gringo" is the oppressor, the denier. The United States of America was literally made out of the Third World that is Mexico. Anzaldúa trusts the process of healing through negative purgation: that she can gesture towards the "gringo" and ask him what he needs from Mexicans is a testament to that. Obviously she is waiting for an answer that is not "oil," "water," "workers," "vacation destinations" and the like. But the alternative, superficial and unilateral "forgiveness" is also a problem: "at midlife I find that autonomy is a boulder on my oath that I keep crashing into" (Anzaldúa 72). Lawrence would have sympathized with this will to power that disemboweled the self. All I can say about their cures is to reiterate what Huxley felt when we stared at the monuments at Copan:⁶ "Confronted by the extraordinary objects themselves, one can only ask the question, not hope to answer it" (208).

In Sianne Ngai's last chapter in *Ugly Feelings*, she discusses the near invisibility of "disgust" as a subject in literary criticism. Disgust, Ngai concludes, is deeply imbricated in the question of what "can and cannot be 'swallowed up' (that is, what can and cannot be tolerated, benevolently *or* contemptuously)" (345). Disgust suggests that "tolerance is always, in some fundamental way, a negation of disgust" (333). Ngai latches on to vocabulary that is familiar to literary critics and authors alike: that the market is a type of devourer. Furthermore, she registers the despair of the assimilative qualities of the capitalistic mouth: "The market absorbs all ... the radical impact of art, the protest of art against the established reality is swallowed up" (343). The Mexican modernists sought to do this by "étouffer le bourgeois," by choking the markets they participated in. Modernists feared that the cultural dominant could absorb the cultural production of avant-garde art (English 370). In the hands of the market, self-consciousness becomes a spectacle utilized to blind the subject, ossify the audience. The protective armor of (sexual) vice or (technical) difficulty was taken

⁶ Honduras.

and exhibited as a dead thing, invisible because of its promiscuous visibility. That the other side of the indifference, or rather, “world weariness” Helen Carr observes in “Modernism and Travel,” is the utter and vital necessity to do something that, if no longer shocks, then over stimulates the stomach of the beast so that it stops feeding (81). That is why the Mexican modernists are both apathetic travelers through Mexico and also constantly looking back at Europe. Aldous Huxley claimed in *Beyond Mexique Bay* that, “Mexico of the Indian [...] is a place where wishes are fulfilled” (252). Mexico turns out to be too entirely and too incompletely what the Mexican modernists wished for.

Ngai writes against Julia Kristeva’s Freudian configuration of disgust and its object(s). She mostly objects to Kristeva making the root of disgust *jouissance*. Ngai wants to find the origin of disgust in negative affect: “disgust is never ambivalent about its object; more specifically, it is never prone to producing the confusions between subject and object” (Ngai, 335). Yet, the symptoms of disgust in the travel journals resemble what Ngai labels as “irritation,” which has no object (Ngai 179). Disgust towards a real (excrement) or imaginary (Mexican evil) object, object-centered (foul capital) or objectless, does break down the barrier between subject and object. There is a kind of disgust, which Ngai calls “irritation,” that is not object centered; this negative affect is a way of relating to and engaging with the world. “Irritation becomes the index of a more general affective opacity at work” (Ngai 175). One of the most dismal places that Greene visits in his long journey through southern Mexico is Chiapas. Due to the weather and the economy there is very little chance that he will be able to arrive in Las Casas for Holy Week—the only place in Mexico where Mass can be more or less freely given. He is stuck in a cold, bleak village with inhospitable people and hostile nature. Although other places have had bugs, ticks, rats, and less than welcoming natives, it in Chiapas where he thinks, as rats are scurrying above his head, “I was overcome by a sense of disgust—Las Casas, that ‘moral’ city, that ‘very Catholic’ Town, seemed like a promise of cleanness” (189). Although disgust is the negative affect that is expressed by Greene, it is also tied to no object in particular, or, to be more precise, it is negatively defined. The hyphen, which promises to point to what disgusts Greene, actually delivers the opposite of his disgust: cleanness; not only physical cleanness but an ethical and religious purity. The degradation in Mexico has had a cumulative effect on Greene that explodes now that he is stuck in Chiapas. Still, disgust remains an unsteady signifier for the dirt in Greene’s imagination.

The sense of disgust Greene feels in Chiapas also arises from a sense of having the tables turned and being, on some level, asked

to perform as he had watched Mexicans perform their post-Revolutionary, post-apocalyptic lives. When Greene takes in the sight of the plaza he thinks: "It gave one the sensation of being under observation all the time. [...] A little Indian boy from the mountains belonging to nobody at all squatted on the threshold, staring in with wide wonder at civilization" (188). Of course the civilization that Greene notices is hardly a civilization at all; it is "monstrous" and pathetic (188-189). The little Indian belongs to nobody only in Greene's estimation; he belongs to the country from which he has been ejected as a full citizen. But Greene, like the little Indian boy, has the desire to look into the center of power and in that distance observe how things operate. The Indian boy is also diminutive, made palatable for Greene. He is nonetheless a representative of the others, with more strength, that are hidden by the jungle or the *barrancas*. It is only through this fear of being watched that we are reminded of the very active uprisings led by people very similar to those in the now inert village. Theorists like Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha would theorize, decades later, the reverse gaze of the colonized on the colonizer. Instead of being the controller Greene is forced to be a player in the game. Greene is made into a subject of study by the object of his disgust which is "Mexico."

Disgust, in the sense that Ngai develops it, is intimately tied to its object. I argue that disgust does in fact produce ambivalence, even if it is not immediate and local. In Etna, Huxley attends a bullfight. His description of the event is quickly and less affected than the imaginative one that Lawrence portrayed in *The Plumed Serpent*. Huxley notices that the bulls were rather mild and that there was going to be no killing, just baiting of the animal until it was removed from the ring. However, when a "very ferocious creature" goes in, things change dramatically for both the audience and Huxley (286). "There were hoots and catcalls and howls of derisive laughter, so disgusting in their low animality that it was sickening to listen to them. It was a clamour for blood, for the delicious spectacle of pain" (286). Is it better to watch the torture of an animal dispassionately or actively? This is also an indictment on non-Western European peoples who, for Huxley, feed on violent spectacles: Nazis, Fascists, Falangists, and Spanish Republicans. The crowd in Mexico wants blood, wants to experience in its full actuality, without any veils, the activity they have set out to watch: a kill. Huxley wants to maintain a false objective and impersonal persona.

Disgust here has an object: it is the "low animality" of the spectators who desire to see blood and pain. Huxley's disgust is tied to how the Other has remained animalistic—as opposed to how civilized

men and women have evolved. But once again, Huxley is caught in a net he made himself. The hidden links of fashion and of extraction colonialism that he is able to see so clearly in the economic side of things, are invisible to him in the cultural aspect of his own experience in Mexico. The disgust here “has the power to allure” (Qtd. Ngai 334). It is in effect a Kantian disgust where “the object is represented as if it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might” (Qtd. Ngai 334). The audience clamors for blood; they want the “delicious spectacle of pain.” Huxley channels what he thinks is their aesthetic and sensual perception of the event. But as always with these representations, there is something in the description that comes from his own imagination. The way in which the reaction of the spectators becomes eroticized reflects “their” low animality, their bestiality—their inability to have to proper distance from the event that they are witnessing, the kind of distance that is embodied by Huxley himself. Until, however, disgust seeps into his reaction towards their reaction and the disgusting becomes “dangerous and containing” against Huxley’s will (Ngai, 336). It is now he that is unable to maintain the appropriate distance and nonchalance towards his objects. But his moral and (meta-)physical recoil from the mob that is in the arena, is responsive to the limit of the spectacle. Where does the line begin? Not when they were merely sticking “a few pins into his hide” or even when the bulls were mediocre. Rather, it is when the animal is very much a non-participant that the ritual of the slaughter kicks in and begins to bother Huxley. The readers of today are culturally removed from the allure of the bullfight. Hemingway and Lowry, among others, would revive the interest in this performance. A close reader in 1933, might have wondered how acceptable anti-Semitism was in Germany (and England), how gentle and unobtrusive were the prods. Who else in the world were ready to see fresh blood? In 1933, the answer to this question was not hard to find.

Lawrence uses methods of non-rationalist thinking to decolonize England from its British oppressor. The road towards a better developed individual takes Lawrence through impersonality. Michael Squires, in the “Forward” to the Tauris Parke Paperback edition of *Mornings in Mexico* notices Lawrence’s shift from the head to the abdomen, “where there is no separate individual experience” (6). Fanon for example, did the “opposite” of primitivism: he spoke about colonial problems through the guise of an insider aware of the outsider’s tricks. “Challenging the colonial worlds is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints. It is not a discourse on the universal, but the impassioned claim by the colonial that their world is fundamentally different” (Fanon 6). The efforts of the Mexican modernists were

not made simply to expand another point of view that differed from the mainstream. In various ways they were looking for the salvation of their cultures. They fall, as many postcolonial thinkers and many modernists for that matter did in the second half of the twentieth century, into the very problems that they themselves criticized: they had to artificially preserve a culture that they thought of as authentic.

The Mexican modernists searched for a collective identity that did not lead to fascism. In a letter in which E.M. Forster thought back to his impressions of America, he concluded that Americans themselves long for a lost primitivism. The material cost was great for the peasant who drank and was dirty, but who also retained the ability to sing (Qtd. Gunn 250-251). Similarly, Lawrence found hope in the Indian's song: "The Indian, singing, sings without words or vision [...] There is no individual, isolated experience [...] It has no name. It has no words. It means nothing at all. There is no spectacle, no spectator./ Yet perhaps it is the most stirring sight in the world" (*MM* 104-107). The loss of individuality can be gruesome, as the Protestant hated the submissiveness of the Catholic, the unbeliever the credulity of the believer, the capitalist the mob mentality of the fascist. But this does not mean that it should or that all forms of collectivities are dangerous, warmongering or genocide-invoking. Hegemony had its own costs: the customizable individualities created vapid and vacant houses of will and egoism that consumed mindlessly, without further thought or care about the damage done to the body or to the producer of the object. The other option, to know through the blood, is an idea that continues to flow from *The Plumed Serpent* to *Mornings*. "The experience [of the song] is generic, non-individual. It is an experience of the human blood-stream, not of the mind or spirit" (*MM* 105). The "white ear" cannot fully understand or rather, cannot fully translate and immediately appreciate the purposelessness of the song—much like modernism was not appreciated as an aesthetic style for its own right or as an artistic-political stance in the 30s—instead they feel fear or hostility (*MM* 105). "But perhaps," Lawrence muses,

they are giving themselves again to the pulsing, incalculable fall of the blood, which forever seeks to fall to the centre of the earth, while the heart, like a planet pulsating in an orbit, keeps up the strange, lonely circulating of the separate human existence. (*MM* 107)

Lawrence's imagination travels both ways, from the infinite moment of the song and the blood to the cosmic. In Lawrence's configuration of the body the blood and the heart travel in two different directions. The bloodstream, like the song, is not "performative" in the usual sense. It creates the universal; it connects the units to the whole. More importantly, it is responsible for the forging of a non-anthropocentric

community—this is at the heart of the vitalist theory that Lawrence developed throughout his lifetime. In this passage and for the one above it, the blood and the song do not work to create a national or folkloric tradition. They seek “to fall to the centre of the earth,” in a sense, they wish (the “to seek” gives us to understand that it is an action not quite fulfilled) to be connected to some force outside of the self. But the heart retains “individual existence.”

Lawrence was no great lover of becoming one himself. He wanted to complete himself, to meet with a woman in the evening star, but not necessarily to lose himself. Lawrence believed that a male friendship would balance the bond with a woman. It is in the evening star, a pseudo-place, that the individual and the communitarian are reconciled. I take it that Lawrence here, with the “separate human existence” is both mourning this condition but also accepting it. Human existence is not the barbarous “will” that strains, taints, and ruptures affective and real relationships between individuals and groups. The Indian song in and of itself is an anti-spectacle; there is no “spectator” because even the white ear (attached ostensibly to the white mind that travelled to get his/her eyes full of a silly, native dance) cannot fully comprehend what is happening. The Indian song is the moment of self-consciousness, of another way of knowing. Here, Lawrence fashions an embodied individual whose spectator (ergo removed) status does not exclude her/him from being implicated in an exploitative capitalistic system. The dynamics of the anti-spectacle also shifts the power dynamics that usually operate in “racial” situations. Not only are the Europeans and the Americans outsiders, but they are passive. What “we seek, passively, in sleep, they perhaps seek actively, in the round dance” (*MM* 107). But what we are looking at here is the efficaciousness of negative effect as another venue towards interpersonal articulation. Expecting, understanding, and going through disgust may lead to more egalitarian inter-subjective political practices. After enough intimacy with the abject, the walls that once enclosed the world of the subject to that of the abject object crumble, or rather they disappear with the mists—or, more probably, they are reoriented, reconstructed around objects at home that becomes associated with the object or the non-object that was associated with the signifier of disgust. Greene puts it rather nicely for us, “It is curious how the most dismal place after twenty-four hours begins to seem like home” (143). But this is not “tolerance,” when one has sanitized the abject; this is familiarization.

Waugh, whose travel journal supposedly contains his “Conservative Manifesto,” manages to be one of the most evenhanded writers on Mexico. This is because he is more interested in Mexicans as his

fellow Catholics. Waugh, surprisingly, is in a position to write as an outsider in Protestant England. In his travel journal he writes against English writers whose religious prejudices tinge their description of Mexico. Their disgust towards Catholicism and Mexicans is criticized severely by Waugh. He dares to focus on the story of how pagan Mexico received the Virgin of Guadalupe—this is in the wake of an almost rabidly anti-clerical governmental policy in Mexico in the 1930s. For Waugh, one of the turning points in Mexican history is when the Spanish accepted the Virgin of Guadalupe: “The important feature is not the repugnance it aroused but the fact that the repugnance was overcome” (*RUL* 226). Waugh is able to appreciate the curative powers of disgust, of a religion that inverts traditional dynamics of power. Waugh imagines a Mexican Catholic State that corrects the violence let loose through a socialist revolution that inadvertently shares many of the power reversals that he envisions.

There is something redeeming in what Lawrence is able to imagine as a possible alternative to disgust. In “Market Day,” Lawrence is thinking about buying some huaraches, and is tempted by a couple selling them in the market. When he goes to pick out a pair, he notices that they smell like human excrement. The couple laughs at his fastidiousness, but their laughter is also more complicated than this. Europeans in the Mexican travel journals always insist, even after revealing the intricate connections, on the separability of the material (excrement) from the product (huaraches). The Mexicans bestow importance upon visibility and connectivity, even if they do not always have the effort, power, education, force, or knowledge on how to act upon these networks. “Everything has its own smell, and the natural smell of the huaraches is what it is. You might as well quarrel with an onion for smelling like an onion” (*MM* 90). The idea of the “natural” discomfits us in the twenty-first century because we have seen the way in which rhetoric of the “natural” has been mobilized to set up programs of violence inflicted on those cut off from the community. How an idea has been radicalized in modern history does not begin to tell us how its other potentialities could have been used to create very different relations between people. Lawrence’s option, which he leaves open in *Mornings*, is simply to walk away from the abject. He refuses to buy the huaraches although he thinks of them as disgusting. Lawrence is willing to share the story of the manufacture of the huaraches, but more than this he is able to understand that there is a property of the huaraches, like the onion, that is unpleasant for us. But just as we do not philosophize about the evil of the onion (or the huarache) because its odor is unpleasant for us, we also should not turn the Amerindian into the abject, into the subaltern. How Lawrence,

Greene, Huxley, and Waugh actually lived their lives through and past Mexico does give us an indication of the limitations to their imaginations. At the same time, the solutions they were able to create, out of the hard materials that they had in their hands is a quality of the works that we should not forget.

Disgust does not redeem the writer but the project of trying to communicate to an antithetically-perceived other. It is not precisely that the Mexican modernists leave with a sense of affirmation, for most readers would have walked away from these travel narratives with some sense of positive desire to go there. The psychic recovery documented in the travel journals necessitates the *rapprochement* to and of the other. Nonetheless, I use the word “recover” with prongs. The recovery is partial and circumscribed by the effort it takes to articulate, through negative affect, why they reacted so strongly towards their Mexican experience in the first place. Recovery is something that is on the shoulders of the readers for the Mexican modernists could only take us/them so far. The danger is that recovery may sound and in fact be very much like imperialism, racism, sexism. The difference between passing through disgust and a simplistic negation of “Mexico” is irony. As professional writers, the Mexican modernists were forced to put pen to paper before they understood Mexico (or any topic) to its full extent. However, they are also candid in that their texts are subjective and perhaps wrong as all other accounts have been wrong. It then allows them to access a monumentalizing register that is brought low by irony and the disappointment of expectations. Mexico, for better or worse, was a model for the Mexican modernists. Through their journey they wished to reevaluate defunct but still powerful epistemological and ontological paradigms. They sought the non-primitive through their primitivism; they sought non-rational knowledge yet they also veered away from the extinction of all sensory information. They wanted to find other ways of being through what they felt they knew they were not. Instead of being the generation of transitions, generation of the lost, they were simply thinkers who triangulated, negotiated, and stretched both normative and radical modes of thinking and being.

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