

Beckman, Ericka. *Capital Fictions. The Literature of Latin America's Export Age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. 272 pp. ISBN 978-0816679201.

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In this focused study, Ericka Beckman carries out a theoretical excavation of select Spanish American literary texts, that from the modernist through the early period of *criollismo*, lays out convincing arguments that support her work's central contention: certain seminal literary texts of this period in Latin America were not only influenced by the expanding role of export commodities in many of the region's economies during the neo-colonial or Export Age at the dawn of the twentieth century but that many of these novels operate almost as reflections or tropes of imagination and desire for the transformative economic processes which the mono-cultural export model advanced in the many countries of Spanish America. Using an eclectic and theoretical approach in her analysis of Spanish American novels from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Beckman not only conflates Foucauldian concepts of historicity with traditional Marxist dialectics but draws on current cultural studies paradigms to strengthen her materialist critique of the literature of the neo colonial period, a period which not only saw export commodities proliferate to fuel modernization but also a diverse corpus of literary texts which at times championed this model while problematizing its goal of material improvement.

With initial discussion of classic nineteenth century liberalism as an economic model, Beckman explores the observations of the "liberal imagination", the utopian visions of Domingo Sarmiento and José Martí regarding potential for economic progress via the positivist models of development in different geographic spheres: Argentina and Guatemala. Martí's exhortation of wealth and progress through the expansion of coffee cultivation in Guatemala is unique among his modernist texts in its depiction of the crop's power to transform the economy and create unknown levels of wealth during the implementation of Liberal reforms under Guatemalan president Justo Rufino Barrios, a plan which according to Martí would hinge on elites using wealth generated by coffee for the civic good of the nation. Interestingly, Martí at this juncture paradoxically ignored the neglect for subsistence farming that provided sustenance for the Central American nation and the potentially disastrous results such an abrupt

change could have in a country with the agricultural diversity and potential of Guatemala. Later, as Beckman correctly asserts, Martí radically modifies his position in his most famous essay, *Nuestra América* all but abandoning trust in elites to channel commodity profits into national infrastructure, urging elites to abandon attitudes influenced by French culture and adopt nationalistic attitudes as “Americans.”

In her reading of “*El rey burgués*,” a short story from the collection *Azul...* by Rubén Darío, Beckman suggests that the descriptive narrative gaze that directs itself to exotic luxury items reflects the modernist recurring attraction toward elitist commodities, a fixation which also is apparent in the poem *Mis amores* by Cuban modernist Julián de Casal as Beckman examines in the same section. This preferred inventory, or “modernist catalogue”, Beckman argues, is an illusory façade in many modernists texts, a decorative space, which attempts to project or visualize a level “civilization” through the impulse of consumption of luxury goods, in essence an illusion inaccessible to the masses and distant from, according to Beckman, “the vast inequality of the market” that characterized the economies of fin de siècle Latin America.

Beckman highlights the rise of monoculture in agriculture that flourishes during the neo-colonial period as one of “expanding transnational commercial relations,” one which not only promised, through the discourse of positivism, increased prosperity but also allowed for increased consumption of luxury goods as a result of capital generated by agricultural exports and their relation to the articulation of desire for imported luxury goods in the poetry of Julián del Casal and the novel *De sobremesa* by José Asunción Silva.

Silva’s decadent character Fernandez in this novel *De sobremesa*, a *letrado* unable to find any productive niche in society, is read by Beckman as the embodiment of frustration and failure in his maladaptation to his homeland Colombia. This ineffectual state, by extension, lays threadbare the misguided plans for modernization in Colombia based on monoculture export and import of finished goods, a general tendency throughout Spanish America that proved inoperative and incapable of generating the benefits of European modernity, leading to debt burdens and bankruptcy in many Latin American countries during the 1890’s as well as Silva’s own bankruptcy and subsequent suicide in 1896.

Fernandez’s decadent ennui or disinterest in active participation can also be read, as Beckman illustrates in her reading of Silva’s novel an affirmation of aesthetics over the material, a critique of the economic model that devastated Colombia in the later stages of the Regeneration, or, in Beckman’s words, “a poetics of bankruptcy on the periphery of global capitalism,” highlighting the impossibility of a grafting European decadence on the nascent South American republic afflicted by the boom and bust cycle and interminable conflict between liberals and conservatives. In short, this is

an indictment of both models and their inapplicability to the realities of fin de siècle Colombia

Beckam's insightful analysis of José Eustacio Rivera's *La vorágine* reveals multiple layers of complexity surrounding the themes of artificiality, deceit, and commodity fetishism of the rubber boom that swept through the Amazon Basin during the first decades of the twentieth century. Here, Beckam astutely describes the jungle's depths as a wall of occlusion which impedes any insights into the distant demands for the coveted white gold known as *caucho* and the many injustices its extraction deals to indigenos *caucheros*. Furthermore, as Beckam points out, Rivera's classic text underscores the immense spatial divide between the deplorable conditions that were rampant in much of the Amazon Basin that enabled large scale caucho extraction and the expanding forces of market capitalism driving the world's insatiable demand for rubber to propel the burgeoning automobile industry and very little mention of caucho's effect on the Colombian national economy and the havoc wreaked on indigenous peoples of the Amazon.

In her concluding chapter "Return to Macondo: The Promise of Bananas," Beckman deftly points to the origin of the faith Colombian Liberals invested in bananas as an export at the dawn of the twentieth century. Colombian Liberal Rafael Uribe Uribe's exaltation of the potential of the fruit as the unequivocal avenue to modernity in an extended speech in 1903 demonstrates, according to Beckman, a fundamental ignorance of "the storm that was gathering on the horizon as he sang so optimistically to the banana." She then reads the prophecy of catastrophe inherent in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a prefiguration of the ruins of the failed modernity evidenced by the disappearance of Macondo and the Buendía clan in the novel, a trope for the ultimate collapse of the foundational myth that underlies the Liberal dream of progress and modernity propelled by agricultural imports

While Beckman's work casts the idealization of commodities as a guarantor of prosperity as a recurring trope in distinct periods of the twentieth century Spanish American literature, she neglects to allude to the denunciation of this very process in many *criollista* and later novels from the region, the best known of which center on the Central American banana enclaves and indictments of the role of North American imperialism and the exhaustion of the Liberal mono-culture export model. References to an idealized progress via export models are not only absent in novels such as *Mamita Yunai* by the Costa Rican Carlos Luis Fallos, *Prisión verde* by the Honduran writer Ramón Amaya Amador y *La Trilogía bananera* de Miguel Angel Asturias, but also apparent in novels from the Andean region such as *Huasipungo* by Jorge Icaza and *Tungstono* de César Vallejo. In these *criollista* novels the model itself is excoriated as anathema to economic equality as a national state controlled model. In this same vein, Beckman's value contribution in *Capital Fictions* study would have been further

buttressed by some additional analysis of the completion of the cycle that Spanish American modernist texts initiated more than a century ago: an exploration of the wealth creation promises of neo-liberalism which envelops the region after the collapse of Keynesian state centered economies during the debt crisis of the 1980s.