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NEW RELEASE

A Few of His Favorite Things

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Taussig, Michael. *My Cocaine Museum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. 336 pp.

For several decades now, Michael Taussig has been on his own anthropological odyssey, sailing away from the fleet to chart a stretch of foreboding darkness low on one horizon. Judging from reports, he has found a coastline there, a place of curling mist and whispering shadows where, as in any good folktale, things both are and aren't what they seem. In any event he shows no sign of returning, and navigates amid the mangrove roots with a compass inscribed W. Benjamin and an attraction to repulsion. This is his latest dispatch, and rather than a conventional map or treatise he is sending a cabinet of curiosities, filled with a welter of stories, observations, and artifacts dredged up through his passing. As the introductory note informs us, we readers are to take it as a response to the bourgeois museum form, epitomized by the gold museum in Colombia's central bank in Bogotá. There, fragments of pre-Colombian splendor lie undisturbed by reminders of the many aching hands that returned wealth from New World to Old, the past contained within the bank secured against the past that built it. Taussig's figurative museum, by contrast, practices a reverse alchemy of returning gold to the blood and mud of its production, and situating that impure mass next to a similar one for Colombia's current forbidden treasure, cocaine.

At the center of Taussig's project lies a concern for materiality (or as he puts it in his afterword, "m-a-t-e-r-i-a-l-i-t-y") relative to the dark magics of commodity value, power, colonial practice, and the fitful witchcraft of storytelling. This concern is hardly new to him; indeed it marks a central thematic of his work, beginning with his first book, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Taussig 1980). This early fascination with fetishism led him to further considerations of shamanism, colonial terror, mimesis, the state and masks, all in a continuing search for an approach in which words and things, present and past, can be differently aligned. Throughout he has remained a fierce iconoclast, insisting both on the enactment of theory in the practice of his writing and on the failings of conventional modes of critique.

Replacing Fathers

Years ago, Taussig sat in a Western Colombian town—the very region catalogued for this current project—and wrote a caustic review of two major works by Sidney Mintz (1985) and Eric Wolf (1982), archdeacons of the study of political economy in American anthropology. In it he cast *Sweetness and Power* and *Europe and the People without History* as unwitting accomplices to the larger crime of material mystification wrought by capitalism, suggesting that both works remained thoroughly entangled in the fetishism of the very commodity forms they sought to examine. For Mintz and Wolf, Taussig suggested in a particularly biting allusion, modern history was laid out like supermarket shelving; the only question was how best to find one's way along it (Taussig 1989:9-10). Reading a version of this review in the context of a graduate seminar, I was struck by the relish for both rhetorical eloquence and patricide that its pages displayed. True to his subject, Taussig understood the power of style and used it mercilessly, not only disavowing these potential father figures, but also rendering them as naïve and ultimately conventional scholars, a fact that Mintz and Wolf sensed and protested in a published response. Taussig they retorted, was too clever for our own good. Like some intoxicating drug, his reflexivity led to a myopic focus and delusions of grandeur, in which he alone could affect a Houdini-like disengagement from capitalist consumption (Mintz and Wolf 1989:30). "Just say no," they seemed to be pleading to those of us who were potential recruits to the family firm, expressing something akin to the horrified sincerity of suburban parents when confronted by the latest form of youth culture inside their own home.

In many respects *My Cocaine Museum* reads like a life work, analogous to *Sweetness and Power* or *Europe and the People without History* in that it distills

decades of thought about a central problematic into something approximating a world-view. Taussig's entry to this weighty shelf holds the further distinction of being more ethnographic in mode, filtering its vast sweep through extensive experience with a particular locale. While the author's meditations take him far afield, passing through Goethe's color theory, Dampier's 17th century treatise on winds, the current migration of birds and the manufacture of cement—to name just a few detours—he returns again and again to two sources of inspiration: the words and lives and material debris of Colombia's Pacific Coast on the one hand, and the intellectual projects of Walter Benjamin on the other. At times a distant outsider and omniscient narrator, at times a village confidant and translator of bodily sensations, Taussig presents his presence in Colombia over three decades and in a variety of roles, ranging from ethnographer and archival researcher to suspected spy and father, not necessarily in that order. He exhibits a fierce loyalty for the people of the region, particularly the descendants of slaves, prisoners, miners, tireless women, intrepid boatmen, and the impoverished villagers of Santa Maria, where coarsely cobbled streets divert an endless stream of rain. Tracing the long destructive ripples of gold and cocaine through this assemblage of lives and land, he reveals disgust and fury over the colonial and contemporary regimes most associated with their spread. All of this intense, sustained narrative emotion filters through a contemplative and frequently lyrical narrative style, as the author surveys the array of objects and conditions that make up his collection. Taussig is quite serious about taking Benjamin for a guide (with occasional nods to Adorno, Nietzsche, or Bataille), and that entails a project mixing collage, poetry, allusions, reflections, history, and exhortation.

The result is not an easy book to summarize or even map, let alone transform into a floor display. Neither argument nor sequential story, its segments layer, tangle and return, refusing standard order in the name of something more resistant to reduction. Perhaps the most faithful summation would be to take the labels Taussig does provide for his assembled objects and string them together into a poem:

Gold, my cocaine museum, color, heat, wind and weather, rain
 Boredom, diving, water in water
 Julio Arboleda's stone, mines, entropy, moonshine
 The Accursed Share, a dog growls, the coast is no longer boring
 Paramilitary lover, cement and speed, miasma, swamp
 The Right to Be Lazy, beaches, lightning, Bocanegra

Stone, evil eye, Gorgon, Gorgona, islands
Underwater mountains, sloth

That, at least, catalogues the exhibits of this museum. Fortunately, its proprietor also includes an informational brochure of sorts for the visitor, under the twin headings: “Author’s Note: A User’s Guide” and “Afterword.” Here he clarifies both the thematic conceit of the project and proclaims its theoretical ambitions:

What interests me and I hope you, too, about the end of the earth where the rain never stops and the trees reach the sky is an ambition as old as the hills, namely, to combine a history of things with a history of people forced by slavery to find their way through these things. What sort of things? Heat and rain, forests and rivers, stones and swamps, color and islands—those sorts of things—and especially the miasma emanating from the swamp. And why? So that along with the ghosts of slavery haunting the museum, nature itself is released along with the rush of the time-compacted magic of gold and cocaine (xx).

This is, in effect, a natural history, one cast in a Benjaminian mode, and thus presenting a nature that is ever historical, representational, and mystical as it flows through an “other” world, not of time based cause and effect, but rather of “physics and chemistry, sex and silence, dreams and nightmares” that Taussig calls “immanence” (314). Social and spiritual situation, then, presence in the sense of a coca chewing Kogi Indian priest: that is what this naturalist hopes to find amid his collected artifacts.

Burdens of Inheritance

The fifteen years that have passed since Taussig’s exchange with Mintz and Wolf have shifted the generational context in anthropology. Reflexivity has, in a sense, both won the day and lost by winning, becoming yet another item in the catalog of issues academic anthropologists imagine as “known,” however imperfectly understood. A senior figure with a string of published works to his name, Taussig himself is likewise a familiar element in the periodic table of the discipline, however unusual the composition of his nucleus. Both Benjamin and commodity fetishism circulate as ready references in current scholarly writing. Schools of studies address aspects of shopping and markets; media and consumption; performance; museums and the life of artifacts; colonial and post-

colonial development; spirit possession; terror and the state. Most are cast in a conventional vein of critical scholarship and exposition, and few cross multiple boundaries at once. But for better and for worse, the horizon surrounding Taussig may no longer be quite as lonely as he sometimes seems to think.

Indeed, some of the disorientation of reading *My Cocaine Museum* can come from arriving on terrain already glimpsed before and struggling to retain the proper aura of revelation that the presentation seems to demand. For example, Taussig names a chapter of his museum in honor of the marvelous title of Paul Lafargue's 1883 treatise, *The Right To Be Lazy*, describing the copy of that work "by a writer said to be Karl Marx's son-in-law" that he picked up long ago in Cali (204). Yet for those of us on the other end of the present reading equation, Lafargue's text might as readily be found on-line at www.marxists.org along with a biographical sketch that asserts his relation to Marx in less doubtful terms. Not only devoid of the wonderful hammock cover that Taussig reports, this electronic version is also freely available, and knowledge of it (or any other edition) renders Taussig's reference less unexpected or mysteriously local an apparition. Or, in the case of a later meditation on islands, readers familiar with literary analysis of Robinson Crusoe might be less disconcerted by the existence of Alexander Selkirk (Defoe's probable inspiration, marooned on the island of Juan Fernández) than by Taussig's subsequent rechristening of this historical figure with the name of Defoe's more famous creation, relocating the mythic within the real. Beyond eliding conventional distinctions between fact and fiction, or Pacific and Caribbean settings—fair game in Taussig's sort of project—the renaming itself echoes the literary Crusoe's decision to call the native captive he rescues Friday after the day of his salvation, and incorporate him into his language and island world: a testimonial to the power of words if there ever was one. And yet the historical Selkirk found no such able servant, only waves of seals; thus reverting the Crusoe myth to him foreshortens as well as enlarges the colonial resonance. These examples are minor points, particular to my own modest academic archive (see Redfield 2000). But I suspect that other visitors to Taussig's gallery of pages may encounter similar sensations at various moments in the text. While many segments of this work are elegant and evocative, the whole is probably too elliptically poetic for mass readership. So in practice many the consumers of *My Cocaine Museum* will consist of those with professional leave to think they know something. And how does one respond to a revelation of something partly known? Generally scholars resort to a pedantic focus on detail together with argumentative desires to assert authority, and I sensed the onset of such symptoms in myself.

Additional Exhibits

Beyond testimonials of experience and descriptions of objects, Taussig includes an array of references to other writings. Many are to philosophical ancestors he obviously admires (the short bibliography devotes a page and a half to Benjamin), others are to studies on Colombia, still others are to historic texts he finds striking. Relatively few are to products of anthropology, particularly current ones, or indeed to the wider array of contemporary scholars who may have read his work or have discussed similar topics. Taussig does not seem particularly interested in maintaining a community, or founding a school, and as with many senior male figures, his dialogues are as much or more with venerated ancestors as with peers or descendents. Most of the more recent literature he cites pertains to domains presumably removed from his own conventional expertise, like patterns of bird migration. So in the spirit of Taussig's endeavor, I have collected a few items with which to surround his study. I do so less in an attempt to discipline an academic pirate than to note ways in which some vessels of the scholarly flotilla might have passed through similar waters.

Amid the larger literature on literal museums and the act of collecting, I will select a slightly older example from a context familiar to me: Richard and Sally Price's account of an expedition to gather Maroon art for a museum project in French Guiana (Price and Price 1992). Experimental in form, the book combines a sequential, irreverent narrative of the experience with a wide-ranging assemblage of images and texts presented on alternating pages. While the ambitions of this work are quite different from those of Taussig's project, it nonetheless resonates with his conceptual museum by insisting on the ethnographic lives of things, particularly those selected or discarded in an effort to materially define a past. It also serves as a reminder of other histories of slavery, centered on the Atlantic rather than the Pacific and of commodities beyond cocaine and gold. After all, Colombia was not the only, or even first source of New World wealth or suffering, nor is it the singular extreme of all landscapes, however intense the annual rainfall.

Following this, from the recent sweep of writing on place and nature, I will add Hugh Raffles' lyrical exploration of the Amazon (Raffles 2002). Also cast as a "natural history," if not a museum, the work brings together water, trees, humans and butterflies, among other things, with a sensibility that has absorbed both Benjamin and Taussig's earlier writing. Here we have another intimate encounter with a material present and its pasts, if on the other side of the continent, the world's "green lung" rather than its pestilent "arsehole" (217). The Amazonia that Raffles portrays reminds us of other colonial and

postcolonial dreams besides gold, those of pristine nature, of Raleigh's "a country never sackt." It also recalls the possibility of a "materiality of the obvious:" an inverted problematic of the fetish, where subjectivity finds definition through maintenance rather than rupture of common sense about things (Raffles 2002: 153). At such times reiteration, rather than misapprehension, would be the critical issue: the secret here is not only public, but also acknowledged, incessantly prefigured and hence "known."

As for literature on fetishism itself, a collection edited by Patricia Spyer (1997) provides a range of efforts to consider the boundary lines of spirit and matter as they weave through each other in both the fetish and the commodity form. Drawing on earlier genealogical work of William Pietz to thread the term back through a colonial moment of encounter on the coast of West Africa, the collected studies extend it into situated tensions of religion, money, clothing, gold, and shoplifting in different spatial and temporal settings. Taussig's own contribution to this volume, a meditation linking the fetish with secrets, faces and masks, arrives only after a series of other essays. More conventional in rhetorical mode, if not always topic, these pieces reunite his reflections with more plural conceptual, chronological, and geographical matrices. They also suggest alternative artifacts for an annex to his current museum (such as Peter Stallybrass' incisive portrayal of Marx's own, frequently pawned coat). A number of the authors underscore ways that the fetish defines a complicated object, at the intersection of recognition and misrecognition of not only value but also materiality. In the most overtly theoretical of the entries, Peter Pels extends Appadurai's earlier discussion of the social lives of things away from commodities, suggesting that the fetish marks a limit of representation that emerges from an Enlightenment intersection of wonder, fact, and fancy (Pels 1997, Appadurai 1986, see also Daston 2000 and Poovey 1998). Along the way he returns us to the more general problem of the active object, and the possibility of not resolving animated things back into human subjects and social relations, or for that matter, action into value.

Consideration of active objects points us to another significant trend concerned with intersections between knowledge and material practice, that of the expanding universe of studies of science and technology. One of the most prominent practitioners of this interdisciplinary endeavor, Bruno Latour, includes a discussion of the fetish in a relatively recent collection of essays (Latour 1999), so I will choose that as my final addition. Latour hopes to short-circuit oppositions between fact and fetish, first like Pels, by working etymologically backward to reunite them, and then by proposing a merged neologism, "fac-

tish.” By suggesting that both fetishes and facts are “factishes,” products of fabrication, he counters simple divisions between reality and belief with an alternative question: “What is it to fabricate well so as to make autonomy possible” (Latour 1999:274)? Latour’s goal is to eliminate belief as an analytic category in favor of a more active understanding of associations between humans and nonhumans, avoiding the iconoclastic tradition of denunciation and its smashing of false idols. While as undisciplined as Taussig with regard to scholarly convention, Latour in many ways represents his rhetorical and substantive opposite: a laughing Prince of Lightness, focused on disrupting categories through an outrageous turn of phrase rather than on exposing the scars of a colonial landscape through sustained outrage. And where Taussig turns away from a reality of cause and effect, seeking an otherness within the enchantment, danger and beauty of gold and cocaine and hoping to awaken gods and ghosts (314-15), Latour subsumes both the real and the enchanted into a single, vast struggle over practice.¹

Surrounding the museum with such a secondary gallery of other works adds emphasis to the crucial, possessive masculine pronoun of Taussig’s title: in the end this is indeed very much *his* own collection. Fiercely personal in its public display, the assemblage reveals its author’s predilections and tastes alongside the dangerous beauty of the articles he gathers for exhibition. Unruly, darkly brooding and deliberately provocative, this academic repository is distinct from other efforts to play on the museum form, such as the baroque parody of The Museum of Jurassic Technology (www.mjt.org; see also Biagioli 1995). It is unlikely to please all sailing under the flag of anthropology, let alone ever relocate to a bank vault. But *My Cocaine Museum* contains the thought and passion of several decades of unorthodox scholarship, together with glimpses of another past, one suffused with heat, bodies, and magical objects rather than rows of neatly ordered commodities. As such, surely, it is itself a precious thing: a reminder of the essential possibility of creative disruption.

ENDNOTE

¹Like many advocates of science studies, Latour resists any romantic rejection of science and technology of the sort Taussig’s language often seems to suggest. In an earlier work seeking to dismantle the classic framing of modern thought, Latour (1993:127-29) also favors a modified, ever-mobile “transcendence” in contrast to Taussig’s miasma-infused “immanence.”

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