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Resisting the Nation: John Sayles' *Men with Guns (Hombres Armados)* as Postnational Cinema

In the essay "The Global in the Local" Arif Dirlik suggests that the "repudiation of the metanarrative of modernization"(25) has had two consequences for the study of the nation. First, "it rescues from invisibility those who were earlier viewed as castaways from history, whose social and cultural forms of existence appear in the narrative of modernization at best as irrelevancies"(25). Second, it "has allowed greater visibility to 'local narratives'"(25) which call into question the myth of linear temporal progress that modernity inherited from the enlightenment. John Sayles film *Men with Guns (Hombres Armados)* both examines how local narratives can be mobilized in a critique of global capital and illustrates how these narratives are obfuscated in the first place. The film also examines the role U.S. tourism takes in the formation of the "peripheral" national imaginary and how tourism is implicated in and constructed by the metanarratives of progressive modernization through which the nation is constructed.

Men with Guns can be read as a simplistic allegorical tale that describes the protagonist's transition from innocence to experience as he is forced to confront his own beliefs about the social, political, and economic structures of his country; however, the film can also (and more usefully) be read as a meditation on the shifting natures of capital, the nation-state, and citizenship in the face of economic, cultural, and political globalization. The film's dialogue is almost entirely in Spanish and six indigenous dialects. It is the product of an American writer and director, and was produced by an American company using American money. Because of its subject matter and its status within America as a "foreign film," however, *Men with Guns* stands in a liminal position in relation to U.S. cultural production. In part because of Sayles'

emphatic independence, the film functions as an oppositional U.S. cultural product. In their introduction to the volume *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake observe that "film, still the crucial genre of transnational production and global circulation for refigured narratives, offers speculative ground for the transnational imaginary and its contention within national and local communities"(11). *Men with Guns* effects just such a speculation by refusing its own categorization within an American national cinema and through its meditation on the increasingly tenuous nature of the constitutive power of the nation-state.

The film, which is set in a fictional and unnamed South American country, tracks the journey of Dr Humberto Fuentes (Federico Luppi) as he tries to locate a number of young doctors he trained three years earlier in a government (and United States) funded "Alliance for Progress" program. Fuentes discovers that the doctors, who were sent out to the poor regions of the country (the jungles and mountains), all seem to have disappeared or been killed. This discovery comes about after Fuentes accidentally sees one of these doctors selling drugs in the city. The doctor's journey from the city to the country maps his transition from innocence to experience as he discovers that his own simplistic notions about the country in which he lives are both naive and pernicious. Along the way Fuentes meets a number of different characters, some of whom join him during his quest for enlightenment. Chief amongst these characters are Domingo (Damian Delgado), an AWOL soldier; Rabbit (Dan Rivera Gonzalez), an orphan; Padre Portillo (Damian Alcazar), a fallen priest; and Graciela (Tania Cruz), a rape victim. The group also repeatedly meets an American couple, Andrew (Mandy Patinkin) and Harriet (Kathryn Grody) who are on vacation in the area and are visiting old ruins.

As a society doctor in the city who ministers to rich women and corrupt Army generals, Fuentes can maintain an unquestioning innocence through which he is oblivious to the economic and social plight which surrounds him. At the opening of the film he is seen nonchalantly giving a poor Indian woman on the street a few coins without looking at her. As the doctor travels into the heart of the country his perspective is forced to change as he is removed from the city and its

illusions of social and economic hegemony. The perspectival shift is marked most saliently by the gradual shift in Fuentes' perspective from naive tourist to experienced skeptic. When he leaves the city Fuentes is driving his son's brand new Jeep sports utility vehicle packed with his cameras and vacation paraphernalia. By the close of the film all of these items have been stolen, his car has been vandalized, and its wheels have been stolen. As he is forced to encounter the people he meets on their own terms, Fuentes' own conditions change. As the trappings of Fuentes' wealth and social standing drop away, the realities of his surroundings (and the conditions of possibility for his own wealth and stature) become visible to him.

When we first see Fuentes in the film he is administering to an Army general who is concerned that his illness be kept a secret in case his political enemies try to use it against him. Throughout this scene Fuentes' innocence/ignorance is foregrounded:

General: You're retiring soon?

Fuentes: I don't know. My vacation starts tomorrow. I'll have time to think.

General: Going to the beach?

Fuentes: Somewhere new. Without Isabel--maybe the mountains.

General: The mountains? My Tigers spend half their lives chasing guerrillas in those fucking mountains.

Fuentes: I thought you'd wiped them out, that the guerrillas were only a rumor--

General: It only takes a couple of those bastards to make trouble. What can you do in the mountains?

. . . So tell me--my condition--

Fuentes: --is confidential. As always.

General: It could be used against me.

Fuentes: Who'd want to give you trouble?

General: You're like a child, Humberto. The world is a savage place. (5-6)

Fuentes's ex-pupil, Bravo (Roberto Sosa) exclaims "you don't know a thing about it, do you?" and tells Fuentes that he is "the most learned man [he has] ever met [and] the most ignorant"(12-

13). Fuentes's ignorance is more often than not linked to questions of scale and perspective. However, this ignorance is also linked to issues of privilege in which the doctor is able to maintain belief in the seamless interface of the nation and all of its citizens.

The doctor's encounters with Harriet and Andrew, the American tourists, are perhaps most illustrative of the film's broader engagements with issues of imperialism and nationalism. The doctor and the tourists are doubled throughout the film and, however ignorant Fuentes may be, the American tourists are shown to be doubly so. The tourists can not see the realities of the situation they have placed themselves in precisely because they are tourists. Andrew and Harriet travel in a world in which the plight of the indigenous populations is either invisible or easily explained away within the logic of the narrative of their surroundings. Andrew spends much of his time lecturing both his wife and Fuentes on the history of the local architecture and the rise and fall of earlier indigenous civilizations. On every occasion, the reasons he gives for historical events are equally applicable in the present, yet he is blind to the similarities.

The tourists and Dr. Fuentes first meet at the *Pozo de los Caciques* Hotel. The scene begins with a shot of a pair of car headlights illuminating the sign for the hotel which contains a "painting of a naked Indian chief, knife in hand, about to sacrifice a maiden"(24). *Pozo de los Caciques* means "Well of the Chiefs," but *cacique* can mean both "chief" and "tyrant" and can also refer to a politician in the vernacular. This reference to the mythic history of the indigenous peoples as perpetrators of human sacrifice masks the history of imperial conquest which follows this prehistory of the modern nation. Andrew can relish telling Harriet of the thousands of virgins who have had their hearts torn out and thrown into the well without reading alongside it his own implication as a tourist in the current socio-political realities of the nation. Like Andrew, Fuentes denies that the history being described to him is his own as he transposes the genocide to Mexico and blames it on the Aztecs. He tells the tourists in Spanish that it was "not our people. It was other tribes, attacking from the north"(25). Harriet translates for Andrew "Honey, he said it was foreigners from the north"(25). Of course, the only "foreigners from the north" are Andrew and Harriet and, as his claim that it was "not *our* people" shows, Fuentes is as

much a “foreigner” to this pre-colonial history as the Americans are. The history he is refuting is the history of the nation *before* it was a nation in the context of his own, Spanish, colonial history. As a white city dweller, Fuentes is as removed as the tourists from the realities which are hidden behind this mythic past.

The American tourists also illustrate the degree to which their own national identities are formed by their othering of the nation they are visiting. As Amy Kaplan suggests in her discussion of the American frontier, identity is constituted at the borders between nations: "foreign relations do not take place outside the boundaries of America, but instead constitute American nationality. The borderlands thus transform the traditional notion of the frontier from the primitive margins of civilization to a decentered cosmopolitanism"(17). In *Men with Guns,* Sayles illustrates just how contingent borders are within the context of a U.S. cultural imaginary and he critiques American imperialism from outside the nation itself while illustrating the degree to which "inside" and "outside" are fairly arbitrary terms to begin with. As Kaplan points out, "America's conceptual and geographic borders [are] fluid, contested, and historically changing"(15). What the inter-relation between the American tourists and Doctor Fuentes limns is how the ideological figure of the nation is a collation of both internal and external socio-political forces. As it is itself constructed by these forces, the nation also constructs a particular --privileged-- citizen (i.e. Fuentes) from its Spanish colonial history while indigenous populations are excluded from active citizenship. This removal is a result of both the violence of the Army and the guerrillas who function in an unusual symmetry, and the mythic construction of the pre-colonial time scape of national history.

Benedict Anderson points out exactly this construction in *Imagined Communities*, "museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political"(178). Further, "what was imagined [by the colonial preservers of the monuments] was a secular decadence, such that contemporary natives were no longer capable of their putative ancestors' achievements"(181). The ruins in Men with Guns, which Andrew and Harriet are visiting and which form the backdrop to Fuentes’s travails, function just as Anderson suggests. As historical

monuments, the ruins position the indigenous populations in a relationship with the mythic time of the nation in which they are rendered invisible or of no account in the present moment. Anderson continues, "seen in this light, the reconstructed monuments, juxtaposed with the surrounding rural poverty, said to the natives: Our very presence shows that you have always been, or have long become, incapable of either greatness or self-rule." Finally, Anderson suggests that "monumental archaeology, increasingly linked to tourism, allowed the state to appear as the guardian of a generalized, but also local, Tradition. . . . Museumized this way, [ruins] were repositioned as regalia for a *secular* colonial state"(181-82). Thus, the American tourists in *Men with Guns* are able to construct a reading of the state in which the "history" they see obfuscates the present conditions surrounding them. It is because of this that Harriet, despite the fact that they have recently been carjacked at gunpoint, can remark to Fuentes that "it is so peaceful here. *Como tranquilo?*"(89).

In an interview with Diane Carson, Sayles observes that, while Fuentes changes during the course of the film, the tourists remain essentially the same:

> . . . Fuentes has changed quite a bit. He's very sad. He listens to things in a much more philosophical way. He's not defensive any more when they're talking about the massacres. He's started to hear his own stories about massacres and [to] see evidence of them. (225)

These "teflon tourists"(225) are unchanged because the lens they use to view the events around them is drawn from both the nation-state in which they are vacationing and from the United States. As Americans, the tourists expect to be protected from any harm by U.S. international state apparatuses such as embassies and consulates; as tourists they expect to have the harsh realities of the society they are visiting hidden from them through the careful orchestration of a national history which renders invisible contemporary socio-economic conflict. In the logic of tourism, national history is turned into national spectacle for the benefit of the wealthy American tourists. By turning history into spectacle, the realities of the present situation and their similarities to previous genocides are lost. Andrew's fascination with history is largely a

fascination with the slaughter of indigenous peoples. By focusing on pre-colonial history, however, he is only able to understand events within this logic of tourism. As Sayles suggests, Fuentes is forced during the course of the film to confront the myth of the nation and to examine his own culpability in its construction. The parallels that are drawn throughout the film between Fuentes and the American couple become more and more disturbing as the film proceeds. This is in part because Andrew and Harriet are absolutely unchanged by their experiences. Fuentes, on the other hand, is forced to confront his beliefs about the unity of the nation. Moreover, what Fuentes is forced to give up is his belief in the "metanarrative of modernization"(Dirlik, 25) as it is linked to the formation of the nation-state and is inherited from the European enlightenment tradition.

All colonial, regional, or national particularities are lost in the museumizing of the nation's artifacts, and the tourists are able to incorporate the generalized monuments into a whole continuum of other possible vacation resorts available to them. As vacation resorts, these ruins are emptied of any particularity as they serve as much to shore up U.S. national identities as they do to mobilize any particular national identification. This point is confirmed in the film when Fuentes hears a different pair of American tourists, two women, discussing Bali as a possible alternative vacation spot. In this conversation, one of the women reads from a travel brochure: "'There is a place where the air is like a caress, where gentle waters flow, a place where your burdens are lifted from your shoulders on wings of peace. . . . A place to forget, a place to grow, a place where each day is a gift and each person is reborn. . . . Where is this paradise on earth, this haven, this safe harbor?"(26). This dialogue is completed over a fade out to a scene in which Fuentes discovers that another of his pupils has been murdered by guerrillas in a massacre. Here the illusion of the narrative of tourism is starkly contrasted to the social realities of the peasant populations.

In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock points out that:

All nations depend on powerful constructions of gender. Despite many nationalists'

> ideological investment in the idea of popular *unity*, nations have historically amounted to the sanctioned institutionalization of gender *difference*. No nation in the world gives women and men the same access to the rights and resources of the nation-state. Rather than expressing the flowering into time of the organic essence of a timeless people, nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and legitimize peoples' access to the resources of the nation-state. (353)

This gendering of the nation functions in *Men with Guns* in both the present and the historical past of the nation-state. Indeed, these two (not analogous) temporal constructions are brought together unwittingly by Andrew when, after describing the ritual sacrifice of young, female virgins, he remarks that the sacrificers "must have had a labor surplus"(24). The ritual sacrifice of virgin maidens by the indigenous ruling classes of the colonial nation's pre-history is thematically related to the rape and exploitation of women in the present. Graciela, a young girl who joins Fuentes towards the end of the film, has been electively mute since she was raped by soldiers two years previously. Graciela's trauma also provokes the memory for Domingo, an AWOL soldier and an indigenous Indian, of his rape of another Indian girl during a hazing ritual when he first joined the army. The doubled matrix of racial and gender subjugation enforces a form of policing of citizens of which Fuentes and his patients are the primary beneficiaries.

Women are also the primary laboring force Fuentes encounters during his journey. At each village he visits, the men are absent and the women refuse to talk to him. This distrust of strangers is explained to Fuentes by the old woman he talks to in the first village as a result of the uneven and indiscriminate violence the peasants have to deal with. The rigid racial and economic power structures Fuentes relies on in his everyday life are disrupted in the face of this violence:

> Fuentes; Are you the only one in town who speaks Spanish?
>
> Abuela: No.
>
> Fuentes: Then why won't anyone talk to me?
>
> Abuela: They don't know you.

Fuentes: But you're talking to me--

Abuela: It doesn't matter if I die. They've killed all my children.

Fuentes: Who killed them?

Abuela: The men with guns.

Fuentes: But who are these men? Are they white or Indian?

Abuela: When an Indian puts on a uniform he turns white. (22-3)

What this exchange points out is that seemingly fixed racial and power categories are anything but. As the case of Domingo confirms, one can "become white" (albeit in an extremely limited and contingent way) by joining the army. However, as Domingo himself discovers, that whiteness is predicated on an absolute capitulation to the ruling forces. By deserting, Domingo is immediately returned to his marginal status as indigent and becomes nothing more than a criminal. Equally, by raping and murdering Indians, Domingo's own position in the racial hierarchy the old woman describes is dependent on the subjugation of other marginalized subjects.

While Fuentes, Andrew, and Harriet can mobilize the mythic past of the nation as they see fit, the actual inhabitants of the land they are on are denied the same privilege. As McClintock suggests in *Imperial Leather*

> One can safely say, at this point, that there is no single narrative of the nation. Different groups (genders, classes, ethnicities, generations and so on) do not experience the myriad national formations in the same way. Nationalisms are invented, performed and consumed in ways that do not follow a universal blueprint. (360)

In *Men with Guns*, the "myriad national formations" are more often than not constructed along the lines of gendered national privilege. As I have already suggested, Fuentes' ignorance of the socio-economic realities that surround him is a privilege of his position as an assumed beneficiary of the nation-state's own dominant narratives. He can not see the Indian beggar woman on the city streets at the beginning of the film because he does not have to. Indeed, the indigenous people themselves seem far more pragmatically aware of their position in relation to

the state than Fuentes does of his.

The indigenous, Indian populations of the film are all demarcated by their function within the economy of the nation. Each group of people Fuentes encounters describes themselves according to the crops they grow or harvest: salt people, sugar people, etc. For these indigenous populations, the nation, as such, may as well not exist. As a national people, they are historicized in the mythic time of the nation and are thus in a perpetual state of descendence in opposition to the ascendence of the colonial nation-state. The time of the nation is mythic, linear, progressive; the time of the Indians is cyclical and driven by the harvests and the availability of crops.

The nation Andrew imagines (and of which Fuentes is a beneficiary) exists within the enlightenment logic of progress which Anderson points to in *Imagined Communities* when he states that "the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history"(26). Within this logic, the nation *must* have progressed through the course of history and thus the genocide which is contemporaneous to Fuentes' trip and Andrew and Harriet's sight-seeing cannot actually exist. By mythologizing genocide in the prehistory of the nation, both Fuentes and the American tourists can ignore how the material, present day situations of the nation's poorest and most disenfranchised citizens offer an alternative narrative to these myths. Both the unnamed nation's privileged subjects and the extra-national subjects such as the American tourists are able to participate in the construction of the nation-state through its continual re-narrativization. The hegemony of the nation-state is maintained through a constant narrative process in which sense is made of otherwise unequal and inassimilable subject relations. What *Men with Guns* illustrates so well, is how these narratives are constructed both within and outside of the borders of the nation-state proper.

In "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi K. Bhabha suggests that "the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a

growing circle of national subjects"(297). Thus, national subjects both construct and are constructed within the space of these very narratives. This points out the performative nature of citizenship within the nation-state. Not only must one be willing to capitulate to the nation-state's ideological structures (as Fuentes does), but one must also be willing (wittingly or not) to construct oneself within the logic of the state. And this is exactly what the film's characters do as they refer to themselves as "salt people," "gum people," etc. The film's marginalized characters understand themselves to exist primarily as functions of the economic interests of the state, even while they acknowledge their exclusion from its benefits. Moreover, the guerrillas--who imagine themselves to be fighting for the people--are ultimately shown to be proof of the assertion an old woman Fuentes talks to that an Indian becomes white when he puts on a uniform. Power, which is constitutive of whiteness in the film, usually results in a shift to the concerns of whiteness and the privileged national subject.

The white subject who is the citizen-beneficiary of the nation's narrative of itself is personified in *Men with Guns* through Fuentes. Fuentes' own capitulation to the myths of the nation-state is most tellingly displayed in his repetition of the general's claim that "the people--the common people--love drama"(4). This phrase, which Fuentes repeats to Andrew as a way of explaining the New York newspapers' stories about atrocities in the region, resonates throughout the film as one of the ways in which the hegemony of the nation-state is upheld. In "National Narratives, Postnational Narration" Donald E. Pease suggests that "national narratives were structured in the (metanarrative) desire (intentionality) to recover a lost national origin whose projection onto a national future organized an individual quest in the form of a sequence of purposive events (national narrativity)"(4). As we have seen, these national narratives, in the form of the construction of the nation's mythic past, are exactly what the film is attempting to foreground.

Caught in the midst of the conflict between the crumbling power of the colonial nation-state and the postcolonial, neo-nationalist struggle of the guerrillas, the film's indigenous populations are left to construct their own myth. In this myth, Fuentes is brought to the

indigenous refugees at the moment of his death at the end of the film. The film begins with the narrative device of an indigenous woman telling her daughter of the coming of Doctor Fuentes and ends with his death and a rejection of the myth of progress and national sovereignty which he embodies. As the doctor is unable to save himself using modern medicine, the enlightenment myth of nation he lives by also crumbles in the face of the local and contingent needs of the people at the nation's periphery. Domingo, the film's most complex character (soldier, Indian, thief, medic, coward, hero) stands at the close of the film in the place of the doctor and experience takes the place of willful ignorance. Clutching the doctor's medical bag, Domingo states that "the doctor is dead. I'm not a doctor"(100). Through this ironic inversion of the constitutive narration of perpetual sovereignty--"the King is dead, long live the king"--the narrative logic of the nation-state is brought down, even if only for a moment, to the level of the individual who is finally able to resist its interpellation.

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