

*Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World*. Benjamin Schmidt. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. ISBN: 9780812246469

Benjamin Schmidt provides the reader of this text a history of a particular time (1670-1730), place (the Dutch Republic), and project (geography). Yet, the power of the book derives from the way Schmidt forces his fellow scholars of the early modern period to confront two theoretical issues emerging from this historical moment. The first is to question our understanding of the origins of the epistemologies/ontologies that undergirded the European imperial program. Schmidt offers an important and thought provoking intervention into our understandings of the models for the production of “knowledge/power” within European thought in the early modern period. The second theoretical issue, perhaps more provocative but interwoven within the explication of the first, is to question the ways the materiality of the production and consumption of representation might surpass intentionality in the development of ideology within history. In contrast to works that posit the controlling interest of ideology in representation, such as Edward Said, Schmidt puts forth an argument that new ways of representation brought forth “a new conception of the world and Europe’s relationship to it” (3). In this sense, Schmidt’s history speaks more broadly to the role of materiality (or at least material concerns) in the development of “ideas of global space” that shaped “who and what Europe would ultimately become” (23).

The first point is perhaps the more direct. Put simply though not simplistically, Schmidt has as a broad goal of this text to provide an account of the transition from Renaissance to modernist views of the world. The field has generally ascribed to model in which Renaissance geographies, which represent the Other through the same kinds of representation as were used to represent the more familiar local contexts of its earliest explorers and their patrons, render the Other as knowable in through the extension of localized knowledge. In Renaissance geographies

“sameness” between European and Other was therefore emphasized. The modernist geographies, by contrast deploy universal knowledge, dominated by a representational system that emphasized the difference between European and Other to facilitate the imposition of hierarchical relations of colonial power. Schmidt finds the application of either model problematic for our understanding the decades surrounding the turn of the eighteenth century, though he particularly takes umbrage with the misapplication of the modernist model with its emphasis on the production of “difference.” He contends that such models take as *a priori* the existence of a universalistic *Homo europaeus* to be contrasted with the Other, and furthermore, that these models in their emphasis on the universal European “skip over” the importance of the “inverse of imperial ‘difference’: exotic sameness” (16). In this sense, Schmidt draws the reader’s attention to the ways in which scholarship has obfuscated the actual process of the production of the imperial systems of knowledge between the discovery and the colonialization of the Other. Rather in this “post-Columbian, pre-Saidian moment,” Schmidt’s intervention is to identify a new kind, a transitional kind, of geography arising for the very reason that it strove “to generate both difference and sameness” (16). For Schmidt, this geography created difference by juxtaposing universalized representations of European and the non-European. The irony is that such representations accomplish the task of differentiation by eschewing the particularities of any singular parochial truth about place or experience. Thus exotic geographies created specific ways of seeing the world, which Schmidt terms “a semblance of sight” given the focus on the visual in such geographies (see Chapter 2 for an extended discussion). By decontextualizing the individual perspectives of accounts and images of European travelers documenting the non-European, the geographers of the exotic were attempting to create marketable products for consumption across European markets. The commercial success of these items was inherently

tied to their ability to relate authority of knowledge, yet to be devoid of the particularities of specific national, confessional, and colonial perspectives. This process accomplished first by the Dutch ateliers, according to Schmidt, signaled a shift from a specific truth based experience to a semblance of truth whose authority derived from the very obfuscation of authorship and individual experience. Thus in exotic geography, the non-European world is a *mélange* of the exotic viewed by a European spectator, with both object and subject universalized and detached from localized particularity. As Schmidt contends, through the creation of exotic clichés and stereotypes the non-European world is rendered as an agreeable hodgepodge of commodities and icons that denote an exterior world open for the consumption of the new European.

The appeal of Schmidt's argument here, however, is not just a discussion of the meanings of *exotica*. The weight of Schmidt's arguments for the Dutch invention of exotic geographies lies directly in the theoretical implication of his insistence that it was the material circumstances of the Dutch ateliers and the materiality of production and consumption of their representations that shaped ways of knowing the world, rather than the reverse. In other words, in Schmidt's formulation, the transition from Renaissance to modernist geographies does not reflect an ideological shift causing a representational one. Rather it arises from a series of specific material concerns influencing processes of representation, which in turn through their iterative replication and incorporation into daily consumption, slowly accrue new meanings ultimately coalescing into an ideological shift, importantly outside human intentions to do so. As Schmidt contends exotic geography "more than inducing a generic shift" created a "wholesale shift in the way Europeans consumed their world" (31). Throughout the text, Schmidt consistently returns to the role material concerns had on the generation, the imperatives and the meaning of these exotic geographies. Perhaps most provocatively, Schmidt suggests clearly in his epilogue that the very

profundity, the disorderly chaos, of the exotic representation of the world that arose from its commercial concerns, its technologies of production, and its materiality were the trigger for the rise of the modernist/imperialist demand for the imposition of order and definition upon the exterior world. In this sense, “exotic geography invited a more rigorous retort” (333).

This brings us to a brief reflection on the nature of the evidence Schmidt assembles throughout the text. As stated earlier, this text is profusely and beautifully illustrated with reproductions of the images of exotic geography. The number and diversity of such materials presented are impressive, if at times perhaps bewildering. While clearly heavily focused on print imagery found in atlases of the era, Schmidt incorporates a wide range of media into his discussion from texts, sketches, paintings, wall maps, ceramics, carved coconut, cabinetry, and tapestry (see particularly Chapter 4). Moreover, he focuses our attention on the multiple replication of imagery across time, space and media, thus extending his evidence base not just horizontally but also vertically. The mass of material collected, analyzed and presented for consumption is impressive. Conventionally, one might wonder if Schmidt is attempting here to convince us by sheer weight of evidence. Alternately, we might be witnessing Schmidt accomplishing a far more interesting task. Early in the text he contrasts two kinds of geographic methodologies - the narrative and the descriptive. Modernist and imperialist geographies are necessarily narrative. They derive their sense and meaning from clearly demarcating differences in place and time, just as in sequence. Schmidt contends that the exotic geography was clearly of the descriptive variety. It was carefully staged, yes, but its meaning was derived from its ability to wander, to crosscut, to bewilder, and to “delight” those who consumed it. In narrative, power is imposed. In description, power arises. Schmidt may subtly be resurrecting the power of the geography of the exotic in the very structure of the text he writes on it. In a truly innovative

fashion this text itself wanders, cross-cuts, and delights. Schmidt does not present the reader with a clear narrative of sequential time; rather he allows the power of his analysis and its implications to seep up from the material itself. This attempt of melding subject and methodology is itself worth an intensive examination by scholars across many disciplines.

One of the unique benefits of early modern studies is the way it engages diverse disciplines in a common academic project. This review represents such a cross disciplinary engagement. My own position as an anthropologically trained archaeologist has colored my reading of Schmidt's text. I have emphasized certain strains of his thought and minimized others. Perhaps in doing so, however, I highlight the value of the kind of work Schmidt has presented the reader within this text. Schmidt has raised a truly thought provoking argument, which demands an engagement by his readers as they consider the applications of such ideas within their own disciplines and areas of study. For these reasons I think Schmidt's text will be of interest to a far reaching audience across the disciplines engaged with the early modern period.

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