

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Yarimar Bonilla (2015). *Non-sovereign futures: French Caribbean politics in the wake of disenchantment*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 978-0-2262-8378-4. vii+215pp. US\$85 (cloth).**

What configurations of struggle and desire emerge from a tactical and ideological disenchantment with postcolonial sovereignty? What forms of political struggle/struggle in political forms does disenchantment prompt? What is political form after methodological nationalism? It is in turning to Guadeloupe with anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla—to the archipelago’s militant labour movement across shifting contexts of status and rule—that I pose these questions. In *Non-sovereign futures*, Bonilla refracts current Guadeloupean labour organisation through a French Antillean political genealogy that has long wrestled with its own structural tangle with “the conceptual arsenal of political modernity” and its “seductive but constraining” constitutive categories: freedom, sovereignty, nation and revolution (p. 3). From abolition and colonial incorporation (1794) to citizenship (1848), departmentalisation (1946), new syndicalism (1970s) and guerrilla insurgency (1980s), Guadeloupean resistance unfolds as a sustained struggle towards an assembly of concepts, tactics and configurations forged within and against the “epistemic binds” of political modernity and racial capitalism (p. 15).

The stakes of contemporary labour activism lie in this inherited bind, the ongoing conscription into compulsory categories of thought. But ours, Bonilla writes, is a moment of categorical uncertainty. In the wake of a national liberation model, Guadeloupean militants reconceptualised their anticolonial movement as a workers’ movement. This mode of postcolonial syndicalism weds the institutional strength of French labour with the tactical and ideological openings of anti-colonialism, restructuring the trade union movement as a meeting ground where labour conflict opens onto broader forms of political mobilisation. “The result,” Bonilla writes, “is a social movement that infuses labour struggles with battles over historic memory, Creole language use, racial and ethnic politics, and the search for alternative forms of political, economic autonomy” (p. 4).

Postcolonial syndicalism disenchant and is disenchanted by the regulating categories of struggle, exerting pressure on the analytic primacy of nation, independence and sovereignty. Through labour and hunger strikes, memory walks, rumour and myth, in their strategies of rupture and retreat, redaction and revelation, postcolonial syndicalists exercise a profound bond to the forms of conceptual capture that preceded them: “They are ready to bid farewell to the failed projects and unfulfilled promises of the previous era but have yet to bury the conceptual frameworks, political expectations and historical legacies of their forebear s...” (p. 39).

Of particular importance to Bonilla’s account is the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century consolidation of sovereignty as a regulating horizon for radical struggle and postcolonial normative ideal. Bonilla flags how certain decolonisation projects mobilised nation-states as “discrete” and “necessary” units of organisation while “silencing and foreclosing other forms of alignment” (p. 11). But, just as the post-emancipation problem/project of freedom met eliminating alternatives to the wage economy, “[t]he postcolonial project of sovereignty ... produced a series of institutions, most notably the UN, and moral compulsions ... a system of international debt and finance through which to ‘develop,’ modernize and assist emerging nations ...” (p. 13). For Bonilla, “we have never been sovereign” and this categorical problem of sovereignty points towards alternative configurations and archives for thinking about autonomy, conflict and resistance (p. 10). Drawing from Antonio Benitez-Rojo, Bonilla understands the wider

Caribbean as a non-sovereign archipelago, or a “discontinuous conjunction” of repeatedly constrained sovereignties; and postcolonial syndicalism as a “project in search for a non-sovereign future” (p. 10). As contemporary syndicalists organise within and against the conditions of postcolonial sovereignty, they forge modes of struggle and desire that breach protocols of conceptual inheritance, problematising the nation as an aspirational configuration of power in the process.

In chapter two, “Strategic entanglement,” Bonilla turns to the centrality of marronage and the figure of the rebel/runaway slave (*neg mawon*) as a complex of resistance and tactical orientation among labour activists. Lukas, a UGTG union organiser, understands the trade union as a guerrilla operation modelled after the political practices of *neg mawon*: confrontation, sabotage, extraction, retreat. In Lukas’ account, union organisers “strategically pillage French trade unionism” by using the labour strike as a tool while refusing mediation and dialogue (p. 42). For Bonilla, Lukas’ reading of marronage is a non-nationalist vision of strategic entanglement, “a way of crafting an enacting autonomy within a system from which one is unable to fully disentangle” (p. 43). For Lukas, political independence is not autonomy, for autonomy retains within in it the capacity for a certain kind of guerrilla function,

It’s not that I don’t believe in independence for Guadeloupe. It’s that I don’t believe in independence! It doesn’t exist – anywhere ...!” (p. 40).

To diminish, constrain or hold hostage the guerrilla function is to diminish, constrain and hold hostage the possibility for autonomy. Lukas pursues political arrangements that amplify the tactical positionality of the rebel slave, enabling the guerrilla function,

What did the *neg mawon* do? ... It was guerrilla warfare. And you know, that’s what the union does here. Every time there is a period of calm—bam! A new strike is unleashed. Every time the explorer thinks they have won—guerrilla! (p. 41).

Some of the most stunning interventions emerge in Bonilla’s thick description from the picket line, behind the barricade, on the memory walk. She tours these scenes of suspension to draw out the affective life of struggle. Bonilla explores the way in which the picket line nurtures complicated experiences of inter-dependence and mutual aid, precarity and personal transformation. And, despite the disappointments that follow – fired comrades, unfulfilled contractual obligations – the strike is always another space of encounter: a tear in time. Bonilla beautifully captures the vitality and scope of organised labour in Guadeloupe. Her discussion of memory walks as forms of historiographical praxis initiated by labour organisers is also stirring. On a memory walk, participants are bussed to a meeting point and led through a series of historical locations. At each site, someone provides testimony: this can be a historical expert but more often is someone with a personal connection to the event in remembrance. The walk concludes with a collective meal of symbolic local foods. Memory walks serve as mediums for ‘feeling history,’ for encountering “nature as an archive of traces,” for studying through movement (p. 141). It is an opportunity to gather differently.

For Bonilla, Guadeloupe’s political history invites rethinking sovereignty as a regulating horizon for radical struggle and a turn to what she calls non-sovereign futures. Thinking in the wake of *Non-sovereign futures* and across the non-sovereign archipelago, I am intrigued by how sovereignty’s emergence as a conceptual terrain in distinct colonial projects shapes the way it is encountered, mobilised and theorised. This would mean, for example, thinking through the ongoing historical demand for Haiti to relinquish its sovereignty alongside

*Small States & Territories*, Vol. 3, No. 1, May 2020, pp. 249-258

Guadeloupe's postcolonial syndicalism and its critique of the nation-state project. And, perhaps, this is the practice of guerrilla thought.

*Felicia Denaud*

*Brown University*

*Providence RI, USA*

[felicia\\_bishop\\_denaud@brown.edu](mailto:felicia_bishop_denaud@brown.edu)