# American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the Pursuit of Riches (review)



James Krippner-Martínez

The Americas, Volume 61, Number 2, October 2004, pp. 268-270 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press
*DOI:* *https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2004.0161*

the independence wars understood and struggled for republican democratic institutions. She also demonstrates that postcolonial racism in Venezuela was not a simple holdover of colonial patterns, but a new creation born of the wars and their aftermath. Peter Guardino's essay dovetails with Lasso's analysis, as he traces the breakdown of the short democratic honeymoon in Oaxaca that followed Mexican independence. Andrés Guerrero argues that, despite nineteenth-century creole nationalists' claims to the contrary, colonial patterns of racism continued into Ecuador's postcolonial era. Categories of race disappeared from official state archives but, as mandates circulated from the center to the periphery and from the state to the growing private sector, regional elites charged with executing these mandates were invited to fill in the blanks with race, so long as such categories disappeared again when documentation circulated back up into official state records. Finally, Mauricio Tenorio offers insights into the issues explored throughout the collection, and into their potential implications. His essay appears at the start of the collection, but it would have worked better at the end, for Tenorio builds upon the discussion to raise new intellectual challenges and to critique scholars' tendency to privilege subaltern voices—privileging the subaltern in this way, he argues, risks reproducing the old search for authenticity and the "real" nation. The collection also contains two additional essays that, despite substantial merits, fit awkwardly into the collection as a whole.

In sum, this is an outstanding collection of essays. It would have benefited from more careful consideration of what to include, what to exclude, and what order to present the essays; and the Introduction and some chapters are weighted down by convoluted prose. Despite this, the collection and the individual contributions succeed admirably. A few of the essays might work well in upper-level undergraduate courses, but the main audience is graduate students and theoretically-oriented scholars, who will find much to excite their minds in these engaging essays that demonstrate recent orientations in historians' engagement with postcolonial theory.

*Amherst College* RICK LÓPEZ
*Amherst, Massachusetts*

*American Pentimento: The Invention of Indians and the Pursuit of Riches*. By Patricia Seed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. Pp. 344. Maps. Appendix. Notes. Index. $29.95 cloth.

This is a provocative book. *American Pentimento* is Patricia Seed's latest investigation into the diverse origins, experiences and legacies of European colonialism in the Americas. Readers of *Ceremonies of Possession* (1995) and Seed's many articles over the last decade will be familiar with her arguments concerning how the habits, practices and histories of the Iberian Peninsula and northern Europe resulted in distinctive patterns of conquest and colonization. *American Pentimento* builds on this earlier work by contending that this deep cultural history continues to influence the perceptions and actions that European colonizers and their descendents have imposed

upon indigenous peoples. For Seed, these largely unacknowledged patterns are made explicit and thrown into high relief when analyzed in a comparative framework.

The book focuses upon aspects of the colonial experience of England, Spain and Portugal. Seed demonstrates the lingering influence of the past in various "historical presents," beginning with diverse medieval antecedents through the colonial centuries and into contemporary times. While the broad chronological sweep of her argument will be disconcerting to some, at times it provides startling insights. The crux of her argument is that specific historical factors—the Islamic heritage of the Iberian peninsula, the relative scarcity of land in England (evident in timber shortages and the enclosure of the commons), the Portuguese preference for trading colonies, etc.—created different sets of expectations, beliefs and actions in new colonial settings. Moreover, these early interactions formed a "pentimento," that is, a rough draft the lines of which can still be seen in subsequent elaborations.

This approach allows Seed to note remarkable continuities over time in areas as diverse as land and labor, "moral" justifications for colonial and neo-colonial rule, and even contemporary political demands and sensitivities. Thus, the English tendency to value land leads to the definition of "improvement" through agricultural labor as a criterion for determining legitimate possession. This also explains why English settlers tended to consider the expropriation of land they defined as "waste," "empty" or even "virgin," to be morally uplifting. "Improvement" of land continues to be an important legal concept in Untied States courts, though not to the same extent as in the former Iberian colonies. Spanish efforts centered on controlling labor, rather than land per se. Seed argues that the early Iberian systems of labor organization (encomienda), tribute collection and even subsoil mineral rights can be traced to Islamic precedents. In the Iberian colonies, a different set of "moral" arguments was deployed to justify access to and control over indigenous labor. These justifications then influence the evolution of the law, social expectations and even the terms of political struggle in subsequent centuries, as the useful discussion of the politically loaded topic of "cannibalism" in colonial contexts reveals in Chapter 6. Possibly the most useful contribution of this book is to demonstrate the variety, relativity and lingering influence of European justifications for conquest and colonization. Making these assumptions explicit can stimulate discussion, debate and perhaps even new practices. At a minimum, Seed helps us understand the cultural politics involved in repressing "Latin-speaking Nahua clergymen," "Cherokee cotton growers and Appalachee orchard growers" (p. 134), all very real and poorly understood aspects of colonial experience.

Seed is no stranger to controversy. Many historians will be troubled by her more or less exclusive focus on the European dimensions of colonial cultures. In addition, her macro-level approach tends to span centuries and continents, with relatively little attention to local redefinitions and specific confrontations over meaning. While this allows Seed to make some interesting connections over time, it deemphasizes the dynamic aspects of culture as a lived process. Though Seed is care-

ful to refer to cultural choices, the model of a "pentimento" seems somewhat static, at least in its application throughout the text. Nevertheless, *American Pentimento* succeeds on is own terms, raising these issues in a stimulating way that will make it recommended reading for years to come.

*Haverford College* JAMES KRIPPNER
*Haverford, Pennsylvania*

*Masters of All They Surveyed: Exploration, Geography, and a British El Dorado*. By D. Graham Burnett. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. Pp. vx, 298. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $45.00 cloth; $27.50 paper.

Histories of British empire in the Americas tend to emphasize British activities in North America and the Caribbean. D. Graham Burnett reminds us that Britain's imperial project began with the sixteenth-century exploration of what is now Guyana by Sir Walter Ralegh, whose quest for El Dorado produced not only dreams of wealth and glory but an early map of Guyana's interior. As Burnett shows, later authorities would both appropriate and amend this map as part of the process of staking nineteenth-century territorial claims. In a book that draws from methods of literary analysis, imperial history, and the histories of science and cartography, Burnett uses the case study of a human agent (surveyor Robert H. Schomburgk) active in a mid-nineteenth century colonial territory (British Guyana) to further two distinct scholarly projects. First, Burnett analyzes traverse survey techniques for insight into cartographic and navigational science. Second, he looks at how imperial governments used science to justify territorial claims. Burnett's work, which draws heavily on Schomburgk's diaries, reports and maps, introduces the explorer as a key agent of empire as well as important to histories of discovery and science.

At the heart of the book is the story of Schomburgk's commitment to making a traverse survey of the British colony of Guyana, a small territory tucked between Venezuela and Brazil on the northern coast of South America. Schomburgk, a German-born and naturalized British citizen twice mapped Guayana in the 1830s and 1840s at the combined behest of the Royal Geographic Society and British government. In the process of drawing from Ralegh's example in order to surpass the earlier explorer's findings, he claimed territory and residents for Britain's empire. Burnett argues that Schomburgk both set and exceeded boundaries and limits, laid the foundations of a long-standing border dispute that would pit British Guyana against its neighbors Brazil and Venezuela, and influenced Guyana's image of the national body as one in constant danger of "dismemberment."

Burnett first delves into the arcana of the theoretical underpinnings and naval origins of the traverse survey, and the ideal surveyors found in Alexander von Humboldt's examples of rigorous, repeated measurement. Burnett brings the reader on the explorer's cartographic journey, using tools of literary and historical analysis to examine how theoretical ideas affected practice. Interested in the contingent nature