

Student: (Jennifer Yum):

Generally I find it difficult to discuss the methodologies of the authors we read this week. Each author posits his own theory, and we the readers can either take it or leave it. There are very few references to primary sources. Rather, they frequently invoke arguments made in the past by other scholars to drive their own discussions. To be honest, there were points in the Mitchell where I felt as though this was more abstraction than I could handle.

Winichakul writes that the strategy of his study is to “analyze the premodern and modern discourses and then to detect the moments when new and old discourses collided” (18). Winichakul strays from the Annales focus on long-term processes. In fact he admits that “the emergence of the geobody of Siam was not a gradual evolution.” Instead, the displacement was an abrupt one brought on by colonialism, which introduced modern geography to the region. Further, he writes that “if we perceive history in the longue-duree of the earth’s surface and humankind, it is also ephemeral...” In other words, his notion of the geo-body is “always subject to change” (131) And unlike other historians we’ve read this semester, Winichakul downplays the element of human agency in shaping the past. In calling human beings “servants of a technology,” he insists that “human beings are too often given a central role in the historical narrative. They deserve a much humbler place in history” (173).

Winichakul asserts that maps created nations. Winichakul’s work reminds historians not to take modern notions for granted. They at one point had to be created or borrowed and significant consequences followed. Using Siam as a case study, he shows how the arrival of modern geography revolutionized Siamese territorial consciousness. This is not to say that maps of the earth’s surface didn’t exist. The key lies in boundary lines. Prior to mapping, boundaries were not sanctioned by a central authority; the kingdom comprised a conglomeration of towns with a lot of “blank spaces in between” (75). In short, borders were fuzzy. Also nonexistent in this era was the notion of territorial integrity. Instead, hierarchical yet reciprocal power relations dictated the political sphere (79-84).

The first map of Siam appeared in 1893. And Winichakul would say that only then did the geo-body emerge, only then did “the new life for Siam” begin (127). Winichakul would go as far as to note that modern geography created “a new kind of space.” Unlike the past, “Force defined [this] space. Mapping vindicated it” (126) Interestingly, he concludes his discussion admitting that he may have exaggerated the significance of mapping (173). To bring back our “so what” question, he proves that mapping had huge importance, even if his account may overstate it. He doesn’t worry too much about the “is it true” part. It is, after all, a theory. On the other

hand, does this mean that his ideas can be applied in a non-Southeast Asian context?

Apart from their penchant for the word “concretize” I noticed a lot of overlap between Anderson and Winichakul. Anderson, too, discusses colonialism by underscoring the importance of power through maps. Anderson on this issue writes: “Map and census thus shaped the grammar which would in due course make possible ‘Burma’ and ‘Burmese’ ....” (185). I would have liked to read the rest of Anderson, as he seems to suggest that colonial power need not be in the form of force. Anderson writes on the museums, for instance, that “the reconstructed monuments, juxtaposed with the surrounding rural poverty” highlighted the inferiority of the other, alerting them to their incapability at self-rule(181).

If I had to guess which of the selections among this week’s readings were the most post-modern it’d be Timothy Mitchell’s *Colonizing Egypt*. Mitchell’s point that non-European visitors found themselves as “objects on exhibit” (7) that Europeans gained power by being able to “see without being seen (26), or that Europeans in the Middle East never felt they had left the exhibition (29), pose interesting questions for historians. Indeed, even the act of staring merits Mitchell’s analysis. But is the complex language and the mind-boggling imagery all that necessary? This following quote is but one example of my general disdain for his style: “In such stories, it is as though the world of representation is being admired for its dazzling order, and yet the suspicion remains that all this reality is only an effect. Perhaps the world remains inevitably a labyrinth, rather than an interior distinguished from—and defined by—its exterior (12). Unfortunately, there were many more of these kinds of passages.

Not having read more of Mitchell’s book, it’s hard for me to say whether I agree with his conclusions. But like Winichakul, he invokes the concept of “the other”. While the “other” in Siam was communism, Orientalism embodied the “other” for the Europeans. Europeans conceptualized in terms of “the self and the opposite” (166). Both authors argue, in fact, that this otherness shaped the identity of the nation-state. Steven Kotkin in *Magnetic Mountain* also underscores the power of the “other,” this time being capitalism. In this case, the bureaucratic obsession with rooting out all traces of the past (capitalism) led to inefficiency and the misery of many people.

While I didn’t find it as distracting in Winichakul, Mitchell’s over-simplification of different groups of people as “the Europeans” and “the outsiders” was quite distracting. And even more so than *Siam Mapped*, I am hesitant to call *Colonizing Egypt* history. If anything, the author contributes a new element to the colonial process that does not involve

military or economic force, but rather operates in the mindsets of the colonizers. If only I could have understood what he was saying the first time around.