

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, 384 pp., \$35.00 paper (0-8020-9454-6), \$75.00 hardcover (0-8020-9227-6).

Sunera Thobani's *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* is an important contribution to the burgeoning field of critical Canadian Studies. Thobani develops an exciting theoretical framework for explicating the relationship between national and racial subject formation that productively builds on the works of Canadian scholars such as Himani Bannerji, Sherene Razack, and Eva Mackey. What Thobani calls the "exaltation process" (the process delineating the specific human characteristics said to distinguish the nation and its national subjects from others), stands out as an innovative theoretical contribution to the fields of critical nationalism, race, and postcolonial studies more broadly. Anyone conducting research or teaching in the fields of Canadian nationalism and the constitution of national subjects will find this book useful.

Thobani's thorough introductory chapter lays out her theoretical project. She explains, in clear language, that her work uses Foucault's theorization of subject formation within modernity, premised on the dual process of subjection and subjectification. However, Thobani argues that Foucault's understanding of sovereignty in relation to subject formation, in such works as *The History of Sexuality Vols. I and II*, must be re-worked in any analysis of colonial relations.

Thobani's postcolonial theorization productively draws on the accounts of colonial violence of Achille Mbembe and Frantz Fanon. In Mbembe's work on sovereign power, what he calls "necro-politics" over colonized populations is enacted through the capacity to dictate "who may live and who must die" (p. 12). Thobani argues persuasively that this conception problematizes Foucault's understanding of the self-constituting practices of the subject, since different modalities of force relations than those present within the European imperial centre govern colonized populations. "The colonial world," Thobani explains using Fanon's work on the colonial encounter, "emerged as a world divided: on the one side, a world of law, privilege, access to wealth, status, and power for the settler; on the other, a world defined *in law* as being 'law-

less,' a world of poverty, squalor, and death for the native" (p. 38). To theorize such colonial governmentalities one must engage in genealogical work that interrogates distinct colonial forms of power, a task Thobani sets out to accomplish throughout this study.

The groundwork for her novel reworking of processes of subject formation thus laid, Thobani explores the role the law has played in exalting Canadian national subjects. She skillfully demonstrates how the violence of colonialism transforms into legal structures. Drawing on theorists as diverse as Walter Benjamin, whose "Critique of Violence" famously proclaimed that "something rotten in law is revealed," and Giorgio Agamben, whose recent works on the figure of *homo sacer* and the "state of exception" have advanced influential conceptions of the relationship between law and violence, she explicates how Western forms of sovereignty are in fact racialized forms of power enacted in the colonial encounter.

Thobani shows how the relationship amongst violence, law, and the making of national subjects works in the Canadian national context. For example, in explaining the formation of the reserve system, she persuasively argues that the Canadian state erased indigenous peoples from the landscape, emptying them of their human status, in a process she calls "*humanitas nullius*" (p. 50). In doing so, the Canadian sovereign created "Indians" as a new category of human life, juridically erasing the existence of indigenous nations (Haudenosaunee, Salish, Anishnabe, etc.), because indigenous forms of sovereignty openly challenged Canadian claims to land. Law then comes to define who is worthy of the land — in this case, law-abiding national subjects — rendering indigenous claims superfluous, or indeed, against the law. In this way, the Canadian nation was conceived through racial violence, and the continual suppression of indigenous sovereignty has become the necessary condition of Canadian sovereignty. Throughout Thobani's analysis, the racial dimension of this national subject comes through clearly. In her words: "The sovereign institutionalized the subjugation of Aboriginal peoples, and the nation's subjects, exalted in law, were the beneficiaries of this process *as members of a superior race*" (p. 61). Therefore, according to the legal regime put in place, one becomes Canadian through persistent participation in, and tacit approval of indigenous dispossession, which, in the Canadian context, has become a naturalized feature of the colonial order, as evidenced by recent responses to the indigenous struggles in Tyendinaga, Sharbot Lake, and Caledonia.

While I cannot fault her analysis of how exaltation works through the law, I do wonder what effect consigning indigenous peoples to a liminality between Agamben's *zoë* and *homo sacer*, essentially wide open to the law's many violences, has on setting the terrain for indigenous

resistances to such violences. Given the diverse historical and contemporary forms of resistance organized against Canadian state sovereignty by indigenous peoples, and ongoing efforts to assert indigenous forms of sovereignty, I believe Thobani's work, particularly in this section, would benefit from a more sustained engagement with indigenous responses to such enduring encounters.

Another of Thobani's contributions lies in her empirical investigation of two national public consultations that took place in 1994: the Immigration Policy Review and the Social Security Review. Using such theorists as Ghassan Hage and Sara Ahmed, she persuasively argues that these reviews provided nationals with a platform to express the prevalent anti-immigrant discourse of the time. The reviews exemplify a "racially charged contemporary presentation of immigrants" (p. 199) through which nationals come to define themselves in relation to racial others. By constituting themselves as "masters of national space," nationals are able to view racial others as objects requiring management or even control. The reviews reproduced understandings of Canadians as white nationals, despite the ever-increasing racial diversity of the population. They also legitimated the unequal citizenship rights of racial others, and even upheld the possibility of increasing restrictions on citizenship rights in the future. The reviews are a telling instance of the exaltation of national subjects, fixing the national subject as the bearer of a higher order of humanity in relation to racial others.

Exalted Subjects presents a critical introduction to the process of exaltation, a solid argument for understanding the making of national subjects, and a notable contribution to plotting the genealogy of the Canadian national subject.

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