

## Diane Nelson's *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala*

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Nelson, Diane. *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. 403 pages. £82.00 cloth, £19.98 paper.



*Reckoning* is an expansive examination of how diverse networks of Guatemalans are working to know, to reconcile, and to act upon the always-shifting suspicion/grief/hope-filled horizons of post-war Guatemala. It is a text of difficult questions, approached sideways through stories that are at once humorous and horrifying. Following what she calls a “Pink Freud” methodology of dialectical montage that takes seriously the unspoken, unconscious and affective ties of personal-political relations, Nelson guides readers along rainstorm-interrupted walks past mass graves in the highland community of Joyabaj, to horror-film theater houses in the Guatemala City’s Sexta-avenida, and through both international and local academic centers and political offices. The sprawling range of anecdotes she presents comes from over two decades of engaged activism in Guatemala and encompasses ethnographic conversations, wartime documents, newspaper clippings, comics, informal jokes and science fictions novels. Imploring her audience to “learn to see bad films” (113) she also merges “the real with the reel” (100), articulating post-war Guatemala through films such as *The Matrix*, *Candyman*, *Bamboozled*, *Bowling for Columbine*, and *Nine Queens*. Like Joyabaj’s patron Saint – *La Virgen de Tránsito*, also known as the Virgin of the Assumption – *Reckoning* is always on the move.

Nelson begins the clever, intricate work with an exploration of her informants’ claims of *engaño*—that Guatemala’s war was the result of being deluded, beguiled or duped. As she leads us through masked appearances and halls of mirrors, she teases

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apart basic assumptions of identity (presented succinctly in a cheat sheet at the front of the book) while asking: “How do you trust others, yourself, what you know (or thought you did) for sure?” (xv). She addresses this in the first half of the book by analyzing the networks of assumed identifications (“identi-ties”) through which war and post-war communities mobilize. She fills the text with doubles: two-faced Indian(-giver)s, dual-sided states, the uncanny twin-identities that post-war citizens inhabit as victims, perpetrators, witnesses and survivors. She draws upon Donna Haraway throughout her exploration of transforming appearances to argue that: “two is too many” (rigid binaries collapse upon themselves) but “one is not enough” (we must nonetheless reckon with differences and divisions). Rife with double-entendre, *Reckoning* is an etymological playground where words themselves split: *Contar*: to count/to tell; *Articulate*: to voice/to connect; *Assume*: to believe without proof/to accept responsibility for something; *Mean*: to signify/harmful; *End*: completion/desired goal. She employs storytelling – with its narrative details that are often pushed aside as extraneous in the face of seemingly modern and rational numbers – “to make knowledge powerful” (xvii), but she also warns us: “little do I know” (170). Since anthropologists can be ludicrous too, readers must remain vigilant of the “con” in the text.

For those familiar with Nelson’s already-influential body of ethnographic theory, chapters 6-8 present especially novel extensions of her interest in the multi-faceted operations of the Guatemalan state (in all its states of being). Chapter 6 contains a sophisticated analysis of the role and work of conspiracy theories while interrogating the “Oz like hermeneutic stunt” (175) of Guatemala’s gutted, NGO-dependent post-war state— a state that may be unable, and not simply unwilling, to provide schools, roads, health care, and security to its people (this remains an open question). Chapter 7 centers around a state sponsored malaria-vaccination project begun in the 1950s, querying the ways people are, and are not, duped into collaborating with violent and militarized forms of state-power when they struggle for basic public health services and preventative medicine. Here Nelson explores Foucault’s notion of capillary bio-power by moving between the fever-zone prick of the vaccine to the social organizations ordered around the pastoral powers of microbe-politics. Chapter 8 presciently moves from linkages between war and science to those between war and finance, interrogating the privatization models of neoliberalism (where ostensible transparency and freedom become other mechanisms of delusion and control) and derivative-driven speculative accumulation. “How is it,” she asks, “that the state and market evade responsibility through the very procedures designed to bring them into account?” (295). She suggests it is no coincidence that disease and contagion metaphors run through economic efforts to ac/count, to check-and-re-check data in an effort to provide accurate representations and make visible hidden procedures; as has become strikingly apparent in the wake of the current economic collapse, illness runs through the financial community’s social body. Although several of the ideas she raises here – the treatise on zero, the explosion of the very idea of balance, the paradox of economic (and anthropological) attempts at representation within systems that are always-already generative – warrant ethnographic elaboration and could easily be expanded

into another project, the connections she makes between the fake, freak, fascination, and finance are stunning.

*Reckoning* is as demanding as it is playful; as we spin, like the dancers of the *Baile del Palo Volador* that Nelson describes, among the theories of Marx, Zizek, Lacan, Latour, Lamark, Poovey, Rotman, etc., we find ourselves with no easy answers to the questions she poses. She warns readers from the outset that we will find ourselves in the terrain of both/and instead of either/or— that her aim is to present a “good caper story” that opens up narratives to active reconfigurations rather than providing neat conclusions (an impossibility, anyway, as “being in the know is an ongoing process” (30)). She has even purposefully made some of her writings confusing, she suggests, to shake up our analytic categories and to “share the sense of sensual overload, of blur and confusion” (195) she has experienced in reckoning with post-war Guatemala. It’s a daring, sometimes disorienting, but ultimately successful tactic, and Nelson has given us a challenging, rich, creative text, remarkable for the ends, and beginnings, that it generates.

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