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A review of Christine R. Johnson, *The German Discovery of the World: Renaissance Encounters with the Strange and Marvelous*. Studies in Early Modern German History. Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2008. 304 pp. 6 x 9, ill., \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-8139-2712-1

Christine R. Johnson has made an invaluable contribution to work on the impact and assimilation of the geographical, economic, and epistemological expansions of early modern Europe. Much of the research is original, and thickly supports her argument for the necessity of extending existing “study of cross-cultural exchange and conflict...to include the intra-cultural” (205). It goes without saying, of course, that in this multitudinous world she is not the trailblazer. The works that leaped first to my own mind were: Denis de l’Age’s on the French 17th-century fur-trade, Andrew Murphy’s on the dynamic of “proximity” in England’s colonial appropriation of its neighbor Ireland, and Mary Fuller’s account of *Hakluyt’s Voyages* as a strategy for making lemonade from the lemon of England’s early colonial failures. Johnson’s book is productively focused, in rich and often fascinating detail, on the particular intertwined epistemological and commercial experience of what she calls “Germany” for the purposes of her account, more or less “those German speakers with the time and connections to learn about the Spanish and Portuguese discoveries;...thus...the populous cultural and commercial cities in the southern regions and the Rhineland” (14). But the qualities of this experience, that her lucid argument and its impressive bank of evidence are marshaled to reveal, bear crucially on the totality of European incorporation of what is often seen as the shockingly “new,” rather than the assimilably “strange.” Johnson’s “Germany” was “defined by a contrast with foreigners, whether encountered in texts or in person” (14), and foreignness was nothing new. Quick and ready generalization from work mostly on the *imperial* powers of Western Europe ignores, paradoxically, the specificity of the pressure of imperial and colonial projects on knowledge practices and their rhetorics. The texts of German cosmographers and botanists, formed in service to different national or regional projects, were read, owned and used across Europe, and form important corpuses in the literary archive through which we attempt to understand this historical conjuncture. Fully and even lovingly restored to their “national” context, they are fascinating to read as productions of a largely commercial and/or scholarly engagement unresponsive to the dynamics of colonialism.

Johnson's book tells the story of German engagement in the explosive century of European "first contact" and trade with extra-European sites and peoples, particularly as energized by the New World in the years from 1492 to 1580, by which time German mercantile retrenchment from trade in the East and West Indies was an accomplished fact. After a slightly dull but serviceable first chapter recapitulating the literary history of exotic travel narrative as anthologized for German readers of the period, come spectacular and persuasive accounts of German cosmography and botany in their wider commercial context, and two dense chapters focusing still more closely on the commercial assimilation of the Indies through trade, in Antwerp and Venice, with "the Portuguese king" and the Holy Roman emperors in Spain. Each chapter contributes something formally and substantively different to the argument—there is no sense of the mechanical repetition of a paradigm—and the writing is wonderfully lucid and approachable without reductiveness (except, uncharacteristically, in the confusing opening pages of chapter 3, "Accounting for the Discoveries: the Commercial Correspondence").

The chapter on cosmography in the works of such greats as Waldseemüller, Muenster, Puecer, Cochleus, Peter Apian and Frisius, among several others, makes a good case for the assimilation of the Indies and sub-Saharan Africa through extension of the mathematical grid of Ptolemy's cosmography. The Greek scholar's paradigm took for granted the incompleteness of his contemporary data, thus providing a classical authorization for inclusion of new data in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—data which was for a long time simply *added* to the old map, while cartographers developed what Johnson calls "tricks" to de-emphasize the incompleteness of their own. On the tendency to represent the known parts of the Americas as islands: "the capacity to assign an island a number and to use that number to measure the distance between the island and Spain, in both degrees of longitude and miles, removed it from the realm of the marvelous and placed it within a regularized system of European origin" (63-64).

The pages (144-165) on the German botanists, especially Fuchs, Brunfels and Bock, which form half of an illuminating chapter on German disaffection with mercantilism in general and the spice trade in particular, crystallize a major focus of the book on the "negative incorporation" of the "foreign" (as opposed to exoticization of the new). Providing detailed commercial, political and scientific contexts, Johnson interprets the botanists' preference for medical "simples" (tinctures extracted from a single, local, plant) over "composites", which included spices from the Indies among their ingredients and thanks to the editorial work of the humanists were seen as medieval Arabic incrustations on the original Greek texts of Dioscorides and Galen. The humanist scholars sought to add especially German plants, and to identify more of the unfamiliar Greek ones. Herbalists and others also sought, successfully, to "nativize" some New World plants: once they were growing in German soil they entered the humoral ecology that demanded local cures for local ills—and escaped the opprobrium under whose shadow products transported from the Indies increasingly fell, in German lands at least.

The big story for Johnson is an economic one, which channels (along with the usual scholarly prods of ambition and the compulsion to classify) the epistemological work discussed in her accounts of German cosmography and botany. The concentrated capital of big merchant families like the Fuggers and the Welsers not only gave them access to newly expanded overseas trade through the Portuguese and Venetian markets, but leverage with the Iberian sovereigns, who moved quickly to gain control of the trade but provided the German merchants with good prices, in return for huge loans on demand. The accounting of this complex trade and finance is for Johnson one more, and the most significant, mode of assimilation, “the Portuguese fortunes in the Indian Ocean becoming just another component of the market calculus” (115). In chapter four, (“Too Rich for German Blood?”) Johnson explains and narrates the *Monopolstreit* of the 1520s, which set the Christian economic ethics of the scholastics against the potential for hoarding and “unjust prices” of monopolies and big banks and trading firms, but which failed to impede them legally. (On the other hand, the Fugger’s participation in the papal trade in indulgences led directly to the posting of Luther’s 95 theses and quickened the Reformation). *The German Discovery* ends with accounts of two financial disasters that illustrate the increasing difficulty and unprofitability of overseas trade under the depredations of greedy sovereigns who thought little about stealing cargoes and profits from merchants back in Germany or their factors abroad. Under the umbrella of this tale of runaway capitalism and unregulated royal power, the assimilative German encounter with new data takes its place as logically aligned with regional politics, commerce, and ethical debates. “The real threat” was not the shock of the new in philosophical or experiential terms, but “the principle of foreign commerce” (143). It would seem that what provoked legal and political opposition in Germany was home-grown mercantilism and venture capitalism.

Which brings us to my only complaint. *The German Discovery of America* is an important and revealing work, which organizes a great deal of information in the service of a complex idea, presented with admirable clarity. But the word “slaves” appears only four times (once in parenthesis, twice in a list of commodities), the word “Jews” only once, in this account of a world-historical era of capitalist expansion, at a formative moment of its development. The history of our own times is dominated by the repercussions for peoples everywhere who were subjected to the drives of this market and its adjacent knowledges—as raw material, forced labor, scientific objects—or who were fatally blamed for its excesses by ethically uncomfortable societies who nonetheless enjoyed the profits. The Germans were not closely involved in the slave trade, and the “court Jews” who banked so much war and spectacle for the Holy Roman Emperors (by no means all) begin to surface only towards the end of Johnson’s period, so it is easy to see how she could figure that the social relations of emergent global finance and capitalism were not her brief. Nonetheless, I felt the absence of reference, in what is otherwise a fruitfully comprehensive look at a place and time that can reset our images (especially in the US) of the Old World’s New World and the “Age of Discovery.” Kudos for hard work and keen intelligence combined, and my gratitude for their success.

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