

REVIEW ESSAY

Rich, Undisciplined, and Poetic: A New Writing of the Colonial Past

FLORENCE BERNAULT

Nancy Hunt. 2016. *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies and Reverie in Colonial Congo*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 376 pp.

Nancy Hunt's new book, *A Nervous State*, is a rich and undisciplined history of the colonial past in the Belgian Congo. The title itself does intrigue: next to the familiar angle of colonialism and violence, appears the uncharted terrain of *reveries* and *remedies*. Indeed, the reader who thinks he or she has read everything on Congo's violent history, its world-famous scandals and cosmopolitan heroes, and even the strange experiments with African fertility detailed in Hunt's first book, *A Colonial Lexicon*, will be guided here into a very different arrangement of stories. *A Nervous State* approaches the brutalized province of Equateur by refusing the obvious: it eschews the spectacle of torture and the fracas of destruction, sidestepping the wide-open trails burnt by exploitation and revolt. Instead, the book trusts more humble senses, like touching and hearing; it asks us to slow our pace, and move up marshes and hidden groves, looking for obscure healers and modest distractions. So *A Nervous State* [hereinafter *ANS*] brings us close to very small movements and diminutive stories: white hens and trembling trees, a female healer, a suicidal officer with a musical band, a detainee in a penal colony, an arrogant black nurse, some doctors and a shaking machine meant to unblock women's ovaries.

The book follows a classic chronological arc. Organized in six chapters, it starts with the violence of the Free State (1890s-1900s) and ends with the nervous hedonism of Congolese music in the 1950s. Although conventional, the structure helps to hold Hunt's treasure trove of stories and findings together. Each chapter unfolds around a critical juncture, an event that allows the contemporary reader to get a "feel" for the mood and energy of the period, and to get closer to the persons who lived, moved, clashed, healed and killed in the Equateur province.

This review essay focuses on three themes. Firstly, it looks at the ways in which Hunt uses the notion of *milieu* to construct her historical object. She wants to understand how people can live and heal in a milieu "shrunken" by colonialism. *ANS*

Florence Bernault, Professor of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison specializes in West and Equatorial African History and Contemporary Africa. Among her works are *Ruptures postcoloniales* (2010), *A History of Prison and Confinement in Africa* (2003), and the co-edited issue (85.3) of *Africa, Journal of the International African Institute* (2015) that focuses on "Histories of Violence in Africa."

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v17/v17i1a6.pdf>

thus chronicles disasters and their aftermath; the “post” of colonial devastations. The review will then move into Hunt’s unique building of sources and what we can learn from her. Finally, it reflects on how *ANS* contests and renews the writing the past, asking anew what it is that we do when we write African history.

A Unique Milieu

Nancy Hunt creates the subject of her study as a single reality, that she calls “milieu,” in French middle (*mi-*) and place (*lieu*). In English like in French, *milieu* applies to natural and social science. The concept came to biology by way of mechanics, but also by an effort to talk about the social (Balzac) and history (Taine). In the 1940s, philosopher Georges Canguilhem revisited the notion, associating it with health and pathology. In a seminal text, Canguilhem defined health as “a certain latitude, a certain play,” by contrast with pathology, characterized by “shrunken” possibilities.¹ Such metaphors of play, movement and space provide Hunt with a rich way of interpreting colonial devastations and African survival. With Canguilhem, Hunt switches loyalty within the field of French theory. In *A Colonial Lexicon*, her first book, Hunt had chosen Canguilhem’s student, Michel Foucault, over the master.² *ANS* does not mention the intellectual filiation between the two men, but turns solidly towards the older one. *A Colonial Lexicon* looked at how history imprinted bodies and words, and defined colonialism as a biopolitical regime. It is a history of deep effects and transformative processes in the body politic of the colony. As Juan Obarrio aptly noted in a recent roundtable, in *ANS* the subject of the study has no internal organs; it is all nerves, skin, and surface.³ Indeed, mindsets, escapes and surfaces take over central stage. Here Hunt writes how emotions, affects, and intellects shape institutional power, not the other way round. The double-entendre of the term “state,” in the book title, orients this very original reading of colonial encounters.

But Hunt’s book goes further than a clever use of Canguilhem’s notion. She insists on the rich layers contained in the word: a *milieu* can be alive or inert, it can mean an institution, a living organism, a certain environment, a certain place. For doctors and administrators, milieu meant a social and pathological terrain, a place to conduct experiment over native people and tropical environments. In the colonial experience of the Congolese, milieus were mostly familiar places undergoing tremendous constraints and intrusions. Yet, by opposition to a “grass-roots” narrative, milieu does not bring Hunt towards a grounded, meticulous mapping of earthly stories. We are not rooted; instead, the story moves through the past with *nimbleness* and at *mid-height*, among brushes and tree branches, with the particular horizontal scope of eyes, senses, and skin sensitivity.

In *ANS*, milieu also defines a certain “plane” where the historian can retrieve stories, like, perhaps, a lens that vibrates at the interface between the ripples of the past and a multiplicity of possible futures. For instance, she shows that Maria Nkoi, who started healing in 1915, lived in a world that while almost a generation removed from the abuses of the 1900s still reeked of them. Combining milieu with *latitude*, an ability to move or expand with no strict lines or direction, Hunt is better able to follow the many

strategies and healing movements that emerged in the province. By avoiding straightjacketing therapeutic insurgencies in pre-assigned patterns, inherited structures, or obvious course of action, Hunt uses *milieu* to insist on the surprising versatility, indeterminacy, and volatility of Congolese reactions to colonial attacks.

Thirdly, *ANS* embraces Congo—or rather, the region of Equateur—as one place and one moment, in which *milieu* could also mean common ground, or center. The colony, Hunt suggests, was full of racial boundaries, fragmentations, and conflicts. Yet the Congolese and the Belgians also experienced it as a contiguous and common *milieu*. To frame her approach, she uses the usual suspect, Georges Balandier and the idea of “colonial situation.”⁴ I see two predecessors for this theoretical effort: Max Gluckman and Michael Taussig. Anthropologist Max Gluckman wrote a famous essay on Zululand in 1940, in which described the events of a single day by taking society as a whole, whites and Africans, as belonging in a single context and terrain of experience.⁵ As Hunt explains in *ANS*, in the Congo, “nervousness was on all sides” (p. 13); it affected the Congolese, sometimes destroyed the life of colonialists, and ended up undermining the very texture of Belgian power in the Congo. Michael Taussig, another anthropologist, also theorized colonialism as a single unit of analysis in *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, only briefly mentioned in *ANS*. Looking at Amazonia and the rubber exploitation of Indians by European agents, Taussig constructs three crucial notions: colonial places of terror as common “spaces of death,” where “epistemic murk” and “colonial mirroring” erased the boundaries between torturers and tortured.⁶ Taussig, moreover, pioneered the concept of “nervousness,” along with the strategy of finding historical evidence “mostly in stories.”⁷

By using *milieu* as an epistemic approach of colonial milieus beyond racial differences, Hunt makes the important claim that we have for far too long ranked evidence for African histories by racial provenance, a tactic she calls *misguided* (p. 29). This brings me to my next point, the ways in which Nancy Hunt constructs and works with her archive.

Archives and History as Poetic Imagination

Nancy Hunt’s main tactic with archives, we soon discover, is antagonistic, suspicious, and conflictual. Firstly, Hunt exercises the systematic art of “skirting” around canonical texts and tired sources. She uses Roger Casement’s report on Congo atrocities instead of of E. D. Morel’s pamphlets, and the journal of an agent of the ABIR Company, named Dhanis, instead of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Skirting around, avoiding, refusing and focusing on the margins, makes *ANS* a book filled with storied abundance, but also, sometimes, disjointed and redundant narratives. I’ll try here to defend and make sense of the methodological choice taken up by Hunt in *ANS*.

Looking for “a fresh re-reading” of the violence of the Free State, Hunt fights against what she calls the “tenacity of the visual” (pp. 28-29), the obvious and the spectacular. The first chapter of the book (“Registers of Violence”) is a wonderful illustration of the benefits of this approach. Turning away from Alice Harris’ photographs of maimed limbs, projected in magic-lantern shows in Europe and the US,

she asks us to turn to what the Congolese themselves, saw, heard and remembered at the time (p. 48). To do so, Hunt eschews the ethnocentric turn to the visual to *acoustics*. Listening to sounds, noises, and silences, she suggests, allow a different kind of intimacy with violence and a different kind of perception of what happened on the ground. Hunt asks that we train our senses to listen to silent fright and muffled cries, the faint echo of the unsayable, and also the anguish of laughter. Meanwhile, Hunt restores *invisibility* and the *unseen* as historical forces of resistance and avoidance. In chapter one again, the main actors are Congolese rebels and an *ikakota* charm for invisibility that they use to flee in the sanctuary of marshes and forests. Like her, in a way, they skirt around; avoiding the state and its violence, restoring health through invisibility and lightness. Through her preference for the non-systemic, and her effort to remain alert to dead ends and unexpected irruptions, Hunt refuses to capture the past in well-ordered sequences. Instead of patterns and causes, she plays with divergent stories, figments and fragments, and with incomplete echoes. The concepts of *therapeutic insurgencies* and *therapeutic rebels*, illustrate such an innovative understanding of Congolese initiatives after violence. Hunt beautifully brings back to life their reduced possibilities, their invisible resources and interrupted, fragile initiatives.

By shedding light on emotions, moods and feelings, she opens new avenues for inquiry in the colonial past. Part of her effort is to retrieve the most recalcitrant object of all: the inarticulate, the unconscious, and the irrational. Looking at the healing movement *Lianja* against barrenness for instance (pp. 120-15) Hunt recovers indigenous views of pregnancy as ludic, teasing, and droll, but also of terrors about cannibalism and transgressive fatherhood. In her chapter about “A Penal Colony, An Infertility Clinic,” she traces the reveries, resentment and ennui of a convict (pp. 167-75).

Hunt is not the first to walk down this lane, but she is one of the few to do so in Africa. *ANS*, however, offers little conversation with the literature that has reinvented the archival record to work with moods, sentiments and the unconscious. I am thinking of Jacqueline Rose’s seminal book *States of Fantasy*, on the constitutive role played by fantasy in institutional and interpersonal relations, and the importance of analytical categories such as loss, yearning, resistance, and “protective fictions.” Ann Stoler, a central author on colonial intimacy, sentiments and disquiet, is curiously absent from Hunt’s interpretative toolbox, although amply listed in the bibliography. Absent too is Julie Livingston’s recent book on a cancer ward in Botswana.⁸ Livingston conceptualizes healing, pain, and laughter as terrain for social and biomedical experiments, and rich archives for the historian and anthropologist.

I will now turn to my final point—the ways in which Nancy Hunt’s writing serves her effort to write the past in new ways. One of the book’s most satisfying achievements indeed is to tilt the gaze and change the way we try to tiptoe near the past. The question of feeling and mood brings me to the question of history—how to get it and how to write it—an effort that perhaps provides the most vivid and successful ambition of *ANS*. The repertoire of *figuration* is useful here (I borrow it from chapter 2, “Maria Nkoi,” that looks at a female healer in 1915). For Hunt the quest, it seems to me, is to *figure out* the past, its consequences, and its ghosts. And then, it is to set out and create a *figuration* of

this experience—in all its messiness and hidden order. ANS, therefore, opens a conversation with what she calls the “poetic imagination” of the people who lived in the Congo province of Equateur.

Again, Hunt’s tactic is fueled by defiance, opposition, and resistance. The first fence she chooses to stand on has to do with refusing to give in to canonical historical writing. “Sidestepping old lexical frays” (p. 246), she uses *nervousness* but not anxiety, *distraction and health*, but not resilience, *violence* but not trauma (and one has to be thankful here that she refuses to jump on the latest bandwagon—trauma studies—led by Departments of English and Comparative Literature). Hunt then exercises a dexterous and ironical art of crisscrossing vocabularies and social groups: colonials get “nervous,” they “daydream.” Congolese, she writes, have their own “experimentality” (*likili*), they also “profess” therapeutics. Between all these experiences, she shows, *junctions* and “bleeding in” make the most important processes of the period.

Finally, Nancy Hunt relies on poetic writing to meet with what she sees as “the poetic imagination” of her subjects. Her prose insists, indeed, on evoking rather than resolving, and on suggesting rather than laying out (and I was about to say: leaving for dead). I want to say how much this is a rare gem in English-speaking academia. ANS is a unique text that chooses to lose oneself (and the reader) in stories, in persons, in small events, in happenstance dreams. Such a style, Taussig reminds us, is very close to the art of healing itself: to seek intimacy with the real, it lies at the cornerstone of power and representation. Writing about colonialism and nervousness calls indeed for an understanding of the representation as contiguous with that being represented. Hunt’s prose, too, exercises a form of *poetic imagination*, along with what I would venture to call a kind of *com-passion*, going with, feeling like.

There is a lot of risk taking here: from the reader’s perspective, this is a book with much quicksand and many dead ends. Sometimes you go with the flow, and other times you get bored, stuck in details and a cacophony of facts. But if you’re patient and not faint at heart, a new, stunning map of Equateur rises from this rich text: a milieu full of shrunken hopes and broken promises, but also pregnant with wondrous possibilities.

Notes

1 Canguilhem 2008, p. 132.

2 Canguilhem’s analysis of scientific knowledge as historically constituted was instrumental to Foucault’s reflections. In 1961, Michel Foucault asked Canguilhem to be his principal mentor for his dissertation “Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique.” He later wrote the introduction to the English translation of Canguilhem’s main opus (1991).

3 Obarrio 2016.

4 Balandier 1951.

5 Gluckman 1940. The paper came also be to known as the “Bridge Paper.”

6 Taussig 1987.

7 Taussig 1992.

8 Livingston 2012.

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