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# E Pluribus Unum

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*On Lingering and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World*, by Jonathan Elmer. Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008. Pp. 256. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper.

Violence, Slavoj Žižek contended in 2008, is a tricky thing indeed. It assumes multiple forms but can be grasped only through a singular motion: lingering. Ours, he argues, is a time of urgency wherein Western media disseminate select images of select atrocities to the point where their ubiquity threatens to forestall critical thought. The rhythm of broadcast pressures viewers to respond to these happenings as breaks in the placid surface of everyday life, to be solved singularly and quickly so that normalcy can return. But violence is not just an event; it is also a structure that holds both remarkable and unmarked, the few and the many, in a firm embrace. Scholars thus need to pause over the torsions of the present, to “‘wait and see’ by means of a patient, critical analysis” why some acts and their actors become icons while others fade away or are never documented.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Elmer’s *On Lingering and Being Last: Race and Sovereignty in the New World* does just this, joining political scientists, religious scholars, and historians in lingering over an old riddle: sovereignty. What he finds through unfolding the history of sovereignty from antiquity to a bizarre incident in 1997 involving a man, an old tree, and a chainsaw is that much like Žižek’s sense of violence, sovereignty pivots between the one and the many. “How does the single case, the unique text or figure, ever attain through the

pressure of interpretation the status of the exemplary?" (192), Elmer asks at the end of the book. It is a question unasked and unanswerable by Giorgio Agamben's theory of sovereignty, which accounts only for the intense singularity of its twinned figures, the exceptional sovereign and the lonely *homo sacer*. Elmer's answer—violence in the New World—is of interest to all with a stake in sovereignty (which, as he shows, is everyone), but scholars working in American Studies, American Indian Studies, Colonial/Postcolonial Studies, Literary Studies, and Trauma Studies will take particular note. Throughout an introduction and six chapters Elmer patiently details to dazzling effect how violence works in a combination of Anglophone literature, race, and space to give e pluribus unum its jagged shape.

*On Lingering and Being Last* is important not just because it moves Agamben to the Americas, though it does that. Elmer harnesses Agamben's insight into sovereign singularity to make a case for approaching politics through literary critical methods and, in emphasizing literature, brings a history of writers and readers into a show-down that, according to Agamben, involves only two: the sovereign and the sacred man. The foundational intervention of Elmer's book is that the "trope" (6)—that singular image of a captive king or of a losing and lost Indian—points to

and passes on to others that which constitutes "the deepest strata of the political imagination of Atlantic modernity" (3), a fascination with sovereignty. Endurance, not erasure, pattern, not break—these are the temporal postures of sovereignty that Elmer traces from the Greek-derived word "autonomy," a word that bridges political and individual sovereignty. What he finds is an original use that reverses the direction of personification that Hobbes gave us. The horror of *Leviathan* is its memorable frontispiece wherein a state is transmogrified into an individual, but "[t]he idea of personal autonomy, it turns out, is derived from the political community; the individual is *personified*, we might say, as a state" (9). Etymology was easily forgotten, however. What stayed with people instead was a notion of autonomy personified by the solitary living death of Sophocles's Antigone, who becomes autonomous by assuming the inhuman characteristics of the state: "radical exceptionality" and "a kind of deathlessness" (10). What came after Antigone did not leave her behind even if it did not recognize that it took her across centuries and oceans into a new time of longing for what was never really gone but could not ever fully manifest itself outside of metaphor. "[L]ike Antigone, my royal slaves and captive kings and last chiefs are attempts to imagine the mystery of autonomy," Elmer writes, as "they are figures

who bear the meaning of the social collectivity in their very isolation, somehow both mortal like the rest of us and yet able to enter a zone of quasi-immortality, by turns exalted and abjected." It is this "mythical existence of the autonomous individual," carved out of equal parts state and self, life and death, history and dream, that Elmer identifies as "the condition of 'lingering and being last'" (10). And it is this condition, he argues, that suspends generations of readers over the impossibly deferred death of the African king Oroonoko, the gleaming razor of Herman Melville's insurrectionary Babo, and the lonely speech of the Indian Logan in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

This is Elmer's other crucial intervention: the fiction of autonomy endured long after Antigone, but to do so it changed from white to black and Indian. Elmer tracks sovereignty from a white antiquity to a white Europe, but he does not leave it there. In chapter 1 he follows sovereignty, buried in the imagination of royalist Aphra Behn, into a new world where Charles I (Leviathan though he may be on one side of the water) is nowhere to be found. Indigenous and enslaved peoples had governing structures of their own, but colonists, political theorists, and royalist writers were blind to these; to them, America was the state of nature far away from the reach of a small (and occasionally headless!) sovereign. "[T]ransplanted to the

new world," Elmer argues, sovereignty was "deterritorialized—unleashed, intensified, submitted to torsion" (16). He draws on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of de- and reterritorialization to articulate the New World not as periphery but instead as the place wherein codes—or ways of making and navigating space—were loosened and eventually tightened up again but never in the same shape as before (24). Behn was an unflappable monarchist who was also a subject of a state that killed its king. Violence against the sovereign slackened the codes that structured her imagination, but death, which took sovereignty away, gave it back again in a shadowy figure that springs from her writings. Elmer calls this figure the "sovereign individual." By quickly and definitively separating head from body, the execution of Charles I made the sovereign individual; Oroonoko's execution made the individual sovereign—exceptional and deathless—and thus the New World was simultaneously England and twisted around to the "ambiguous spaces and twilit times" of the state of nature (49). Sovereignty did not die with Charles, to be sure, but it could not live without Oroonoko.

And Oroonoko could not live without sovereignty. Precisely because he was brought to a lingering end as the "'last of the race'" (47), Oroonoko became a type that lived on in his "heirs" (51): Olaudah

Equiano, Herman Melville's Axtel, and Thomas Jefferson's Logan, the subjects of Elmer's next three chapters. Sovereignty in the New World, originating as the drawn-out death that would itself become an immortal trope, was racialized. Through race, the European imagination told itself stories: about its outside, about its contradictory desires for mobility and for settlement, and above all about its similarity to and difference from nonwhite bodies. The fates of white and nonwhite bodies alike testified that under a mercurial system such as sovereignty, "inversions and revolutions of fortune," from living to merely lingering, are "the normal course of events" (4, 94) for *everybody*. But by "quarantin[ing]" (141) these many conflicting stories in singular racialized bodies, the European imagination aimed to shield itself from the knowledge of its own precarious life. It created, in Elmer's words, a "one" from the (singular) "not one[s]" (141). From its inception in the New World, however, sovereignty was never one but double. The legacy that Oroonoko passes on is of two sovereignties: one white, one dark; one absent, one present; one here, one "spatially and temporally dislocated, off to the side, both trailing behind and running ahead, *foreshadowing*" (22). The racialized sovereign was a "hinge" (11) that moved readers between oppo-

sites, revealing their unity even as race remained a "screen" (18) that kept white Europeans and Americans from lingering too long over the possible futures to which all were—and remain—vulnerable under a sovereign state.

But lingering and being last is not just a literary trope or a condition tethered to certain bodies; it is also a "zone" (14). Comprised of equal parts American topography and New World dream, this space is the heart of Elmer's project. The European imagination was torn between a desire to move and an equally powerful desire to settle. Elmer's racialized sovereigns are thus split by which half of the zone—movement or settlement—they primarily embody, even as they pivot endlessly between the two poles. The first three chapters track movement or literal deterritorialization, which is raced as "African" and oriented toward "an ever-postponed *emancipation*" (121). Oroonoko's end kicked off the "Oroonoko effect," the "figure of the captive king" (119) whose power to captivate derived from its movement out of the territory and into somewhere new and as something new. But Oroonoko only demonstrated the lingering power of the old order. In chapter 2, Equiano combines familiar elements—movement and battered bodies—to new ends: "a Christian future yet to come," in which no body will bear marks, neither of elevation nor of slavery, because they will "no longer divide the mortal self from the

immortal sovereignty for which we continue to yearn" (77). In chapter 3, blackness in Melville's fiction functions as a "symbol of a modern condition of dislocation or rootlessness, a condition epitomized by the sailor's life" (80), that allows Elmer to connect the white so-called mutineer Billy Budd to the black so-called mutineer Atufal. But readers also encounter the suspension of sovereignty in Atufal, whose chained yet unscourged body "projects a vision of suspended power" (98) in which the fantasy of white distance from the structure of sovereignty is revealed as just that: a fantasy. Chapter 4 toggles to the other half of Elmer's spatial dichotomy, settlement or reterritorialization, defined as the "melancholic site for the ever-unfinished extinction of all that is savage, unmodern, or precivilization in us" (121). This half is racialized Indian and finds its most moving embodiment in Logan, who is valuable to Jefferson's archiving project because in him Jefferson "personif[ies] the dynamic field of the frontier" (139). Jefferson packs an ongoing history of indigent land claims into one person and then writes him as the last of his race in order to clear the land of challenges to settler colonialism. But Indian sovereignty does not go away. Chapter 5 explores the return of the repressed in the romantic project of making the "American 'periphery' . . . a setting for a dream of radical individuation" (152) in

the disorienting novels of Charles Brockden Brown and John Neal. It is in Brown's somnambulant *Edgar Huntly* that Europe and America, movement and land, and one and many, most fully and violently converge, and they do so under an elm tree (170).

This is no coincidence, Elmer argues. He ends the book on a wonderfully bizarre note, with the death in 1997 of a protected three-hundred-year-old golden spruce at the hands of a white outdoorsman who identifies with Indians. The only other trope with which Anglophone literature is seemingly more obsessed than that of the racialized sovereign, Elmer shows, is that of the tree. The two are deeply connected. To think about trees is to think seriously about the strange "not one" elements we separate off from the "one" of Euro-American history. These elements—trees in which charters were hidden, funerals held for trees, or, I would propose, the bloody hieroglyphs that solitary Nat Turner found in the woods that told him his time was now—are often left out of literary history, making it difficult to really think about trees' omnipresence in New World politics and literature. But Elmer lingers over what others are tempted to pass by. He returns to Deleuze and Guattari to argue that Western "'arborescence' is marked by an obsession with lineage, genealogy, and verticality—ultimately, the

obsession is with identity itself, the fantasy or phantasm of unity, the one (even when, perhaps especially when, the one bifurcates to become two)" (215). The history of trees is thus inextricably intertwined with the history of sovereignty, and both of these are implicated in a history of incredible violence that lingers on in this language, these bodies, and this land. *On Lingerings and Being Last* is a work of great theoretical and political import that may seem, at times, to branch off in bewildering directions, leaving some questions—such as the role of gender in the history of sovereignty—unanswered. But with each chapter, the book steadily digs into the history of words and under

the surface of the Anglo-American literary tradition to reveal the profound structure that links together seemingly disparate elements in ways we might have only sensed before.

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#### NOTE

1. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 7.