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## Book Reviews

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Sumathi Ramaswamy. *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories*. Berkeley: UC Press, 2004. Pp. xvii, 334. \$21.95

Mythical places – lost lands, submerged islands, fantastic kingdoms, the earthly Paradise – have always loomed large in the western imagination. Plato first described Atlantis: popes throughout the Middle Ages sent envoys to find the fabled wealth of Prester John's Christian kingdom in Africa and central Asia; Columbus believed he had stumbled on the Garden of Eden when he reached the Caribbean islands. Yet few are the number of fictional geographies invented and accepted as real in the modern age. The historiography of mythical geographies has primarily consisted of descriptions of "odd" beliefs held by elites and common folk in past times, and of the gradual erosion of belief in such fantastic places as the real earth was mapped with increasing accuracy and thoroughness. This history has been done largely at a superficial level, by popular writers, and not often enough by historians.

Thus Sumathi Ramaswamy's fascinating *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories* is a welcome work, both because Ramaswamy approaches her subject with a historian's mastery of the sources, and because the subject itself, the nineteenth-century theory of a land bridge or continent between India and Africa long since submerged, is not well known in the west now – despite the widespread belief in its existence 150 years ago. That is, the lost continent of Lemuria is a thoroughly modern scientific fantasy, born of the Victorian era's new sciences: paleontology, anthropology, evolutionary theory, and the discovery of geologic "deep time" (i.e., knowledge that the earth is far older than the 6000 years of biblical history).

Yet Ramaswamy has not written a one-sided exploration of the creation of Lemuria among European paleogeologists. As an historian of India, she delves equally into Tamil Indian folklore and mythmaking to show that Tamil (southern Indian) colonial subjects adopted Lemuria from European scientists. Ramaswamy lays out a remarkable process of assimilation by which Tamil nationalists, who identify themselves as separate from northern Indians in language and culture, came to merge Lemuria with their pre-existing beliefs in an ancient Tamil homeland. To Tamil devotees, experiencing a rise in nationalist sentiment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the long-disappeared continent of Lemuria or Kumarikkantam was the site of the oldest human civilization, the origin of mankind and of culture. And thus it remains today among Tamil nationalists, whose high school and college

courses continue to teach the reality of the Indian-African land bridge and the existence of a submerged Tamil homeland.

The book centers more on the concept of loss than on Lemuria itself, and on the modern fascination with romanticized lost places, lost cultures, and lost times. Ramaswamy argues that geographies like Lemuria are in fact created as lost worlds by what she refers to as “labours of loss,” a pet phrase by which she means all of the evocations (written or oral) of a fictional place thought to exist or to have existed. Ramaswamy defines “the analytic of labours of loss” as “those interpretive acts and narrative moves through which something is declared lost, and then recovered through the knowledge practices of modernity, the very act of recovery and naming constituting the original loss” (227). She then lays out an argument moving chronologically forward and geographically from west to east. Her first two chapters spell out the emergence of the theory of Lemuria in the mid-nineteenth century among paleogeologists and anthropologists who theorized it as the site of the first humans. She then turns to Tamil Indian scholars’ and nationalists’ adoption of and promotion of these western works as modern, scientific proof of their ancient belief in the lost Tamil homeland. A chapter comparing European and Tamil attempts to represent Lemuria cartographically follows before the final chapter, where Ramaswamy leaves the history of imagined Lemuria for a larger goal: to theorize why lost worlds have such a strong pull on the modern imagination.

Frequently Ramaswamy’s writing abandons its mythical subject and Lemuria’s European and Tamil adherents to embark on meditations and rather poetical ruminations. Ramaswamy reflects on the concept of loss, on language, on the conditions of modernity, and other ideas that become less and less related to the historical phenomenon of belief in Lemuria. In fact, in a sense *The Lost Land of Lemuria* is not really about Lemuria, since its central thesis concerns modernity and is philosophical in nature. The mythical land bridge becomes simply a starting point for a post-modern analysis (at times heavily weighed down with jargon) of modernity itself. Ramaswamy uses Lemuria as an example of what she calls a “lost place-world.” She ultimately argues that there is a vital link between modernity and loss; that the belief in lost worlds, lost peoples, and forgotten cultures is nothing less than a condition of western modernity. In essence she asserts that modernity is predicated on itself being the result of catastrophic changes in the distant past, breaks that separate “then” from “now.” By implication, modernity is thus really without a history – that is, instead of seeing our own time as the result of tiny, gradual changes evolving civilizations over time (gradualism or evolutionary theory). Ramaswamy argues that we see our age, through the imagined places like Lemuria, as radically separate from the past, and that

we define our age negatively, through dissociation from that distant past and those forgotten peoples (catastrophism).

It is a provocative argument, diligently and passionately argued, but in the end Lemuria itself is not sufficient to bear the burden of proof of such a theory. In part this is because the argument is broad and highly philosophical, thus naturally difficult to prove. In part this is because the argument does not explain western culture's fascination with imagined lost worlds at least from the time of early Greeks, if not much earlier, among peoples who did not identify themselves as modern, or separate from their ancestors. In addition, Ramaswamy attempts to separate belief in Lemuria and in mythic places in general from the phenomenon of religious belief, although she is clearly grappling with very large questions of the nature of human imagination, creativity, and the fulfillment of spiritual need. Yet if the peoples of ninth-century Europe or Greece 700BCE were drawn to imagine lost continents, strange peoples, and fantastic kingdoms (just to give two western examples—though belief in lost worlds is part of many cultures), perhaps there is a deeper human longing to imagine and believe in mythical geographies that cannot be tied to the condition of modernity. That said, however, Ramaswamy offers a powerful and challenging argument that demands engagement. *The Lost Land of Lemuria* is a compelling analysis of cross-cultural intellectual exchange and one example of a fertile merger of scientific theory, politics, and folklore between East and West.

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Lucy K. Pick. *Conflict and Coexistence. Archbishop Rodrigo and the Muslims and Jews of Medieval Spain*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. 2004. Pp. xx, 239. \$70.00

Anglo-American historians, traditionally interested in France, England, and Italian history, have been paying growing attention to the history of medieval Iberia. This interest, to a large extent, reflects the social, religious, and ethnic diversity found in medieval Spain. There, different religions intermingled, Islam, Christianity and Judaism; patterns of social organization differed from those of other parts of the medieval West, e.g. no serfdom in Castile); and each religious community evolved in close relation with other ethnic groups. Iberian topics are fashionable in our multicultural society, and we look to the past for answers to questions about identity, assimilation, and the acceptance