

# UC Irvine

## UC Irvine Previously Published Works

### Title

Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era by Cynthia Weber

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8jw4w2w8>

### Journal

NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids, 77(1/2)

### Author

Maurer, WM

### Publication Date

2003-02-01

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

to stay in power. Charismatic authority, once achieved, may be sustained by liberal democratic processes, but in some cases populist appeals are bolstered by authoritarian methods. In Caribbean societies, politics is highly personalized, and leaders are often characterized paternalistically and even revered as saviors: Eric Williams and Cheddi Jagan were said to be “fathers” of their nations and Haiti’s François Duvalier, who is not studied in this book, was called “Papa Doc,” while Michael Manley was known as “Joshua,” after the ancient Israelite who led his people into the promised land. Valdés, in a stimulating essay, argues that Castro’s transformation into a *charismatic* revolutionary leader occurred after he came to power and is based on the deeply-rooted religiosity of Afro-Cuban culture. Further, he explains the struggle between Castro and Miami Cubans over Elián González in 2000 in terms of this religious culture as well as political opportunism. In Weber’s words, Fidel and Elián became “set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (p. 213).

These well-written and thoughtful essays should provoke further, and more comparative, research into the political culture and organizations of the Caribbean.

*Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a “Post-Phallic” Era.* CYNTHIA WEBER. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. xvi + 151 pp. (Paper US\$ 14.95)

BILL MAURER  
Department of Anthropology  
University of California, Irvine  
Irvine CA 92697-5100, U.S.A.  
<wmmaurer@uci.edu>

This entertaining book provides an account of U.S. policy in the Caribbean from the Eisenhower administration through Clinton’s. Cynthia Weber, a political scientist who is clearly pushing the boundaries of her discipline, brings to light the psychoanalytically suggestive pieces of the archival record rather than offering a strict chronicle. She argues that the United States suffered a sort of castration when it “lost” Cuba, that it has been trying to compensate for this loss ever since, and that its efforts to remasculinize ultimately demonstrate its original lack of phallic power, a lack it has to exclude in order for it to remain hegemonic (p. 8). The Caribbean – especially Cuba, but also other places to

the extent that they represent repetitions of the United States' Cuban ventures – serves as a constant reminder of the United States' excluded lack, as a mirror through which it sees itself, and a screen on which its insecurities about its own hegemony are projected. Weber cleverly mixes psychoanalytic discourse, wordplay, and insights from feminist and queer theory. At first, some of the more heavily affected prose irritated me. Yet on reflection, the excesses in this text are nothing compared to those of the U.S. political and military class whose words and actions are being examined.

The argument is organized around Roland Barthes's reading of Honoré de Balzac's short story, "Sarrasine." In that story, Sarrasine courts La Zambinella, declaring her an "ideal beauty," a "masterpiece" who is "more than a woman" and by whom he must "be loved [or] die!" (quoted on p. 15). Sarrasine learns that La Zambinella is in fact a man, and is horrified that she/he, by "stamp[ing] all other women with a seal of imperfection," will always come to his mind whenever he thinks of a "real" woman (pp. 16, 17). He therefore tries to kill her, but fails, and is instead killed himself. Barthes's approach to Balzac's text emphasizes its "writerly" aspects, that is, its connotative and intertextual elements rather than its denotative and literal referents. Approaching the text in this way invites a pluralization of meaning. Weber uses Barthes to understand the disruptions Castro's Cuba presented to the cold-war codes of American dominance (Chapter 2). And "Sarrasine" is a fine intertext to the official Cuba story. Like La Zambinella, whose dissimulation and lack horrify and symbolically castrate Sarrasine, Cuba appears in U.S. post-Spanish-American War discourse as symbolically feminine. In 1959, it is masculinized by a castrating Castro, with the result that Cuba becomes "mixed, untotalizable space" that is neither solely feminine nor solely masculine (p. 21) – a space that threatens the United States' own integrated (masculinist) wholeness. As Weber remarks, "the United States comes to terms with this by giving up on its desire to have Cuba, all the while ensuring that no one else may have 'her' either" (p. 27). Weber analyzes Eisenhower's various overtures toward and rejections of Castro, and then provides a psychoanalytic reading of the Bay of Pigs invasion and the missile crisis under Kennedy. Both are failures at "rephallusization," since, while Cuba remained without rockets, it also remained outside the U.S. sphere. Cuba showed the lie of the United States' unadulterated masculine hegemony and instead revealed the United States to be a "body in pieces" (p. 32) that could never see itself, its power, reflected in the Caribbean, as much as it might try. "The U.S. 'post-phallic' era had begun" (p. 32).

Weber's reading might seem a bit over the top. Set against the hilarious material she brings together from Johnson's invasion of the Dominican Republic (Chapter 3), Reagan's "B movie" invasion of Grenada (Chapter 4), Bush's "wimp factor" invasion of Panama (Chapter 5) and Clinton's adventures in Haiti (Chapter 5), the analysis becomes more convincing. It is

easy to forget about the gendered and sexualized rhetoric surrounding each of these affairs – and I am tempted, as a reviewer, to want to reproduce some of it here. I leave the surprises, and sad reminders, to the book's readers. When such rhetoric is gathered together and presented sequentially, as if the story were about continually faltering U.S. efforts to maintain an insecure, indeed, impossible masculine identity rather than the pursuit of cold-war and post-cold-war-U.S. *realpolitik*, Weber's analysis becomes quite compelling.

One does not have to read between the lines to realize that the Caribbean exploits Weber discusses here exist in the same political-discursive space as the United States' latest military ventures. Written before September 11, 2001, her book contains chilling reminders that U.S. Caribbean policy has always been linked to its other global ambitions. She quotes Reagan, who sought carefully to differentiate his invasion of Grenada from the contemporaneous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (p. 76). The hidden subtext was the U.S. support of the mujaheddin. Current efforts to distance itself from its former friends has produced the same masculinist disavowal of its impure past and its lack of total control. Given that this is happening under a second George Bush, and at great cost of human life and liberty, I imagine Weber would see a repetition compulsion, a hysteria that is manifested the second time as tragedy *and* farce. If direct contestation of war rhetoric seems impossible in the United States today, perhaps we would do well to heed the lesson of this book, aptly summed up in its epigraph, a quotation from the feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz: "the best strategy for challenging the phallic authority of the penis is laughter." As it was during the long twentieth century, the laughter would be a loud and horrified howl.

*Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution.* CHRISTINA DUFFY BURNETT & BURKE MARSHALL (eds.). Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2001. xv + 422 pp. (Paper US\$ 23.95)

KELVIN SANTIAGO-VALLES  
Sociology Department  
Binghamton University-SUNY  
Binghamton NY 13902-6000, U.S.A.  
<stgokel@binghamton.edu>

In *Foreign in a Domestic Sense* sixteen contributors, including renowned legal scholars, discuss the juridico-political implications of the U.S. Supreme Courts's "Insular Cases" (1901-5). The editors expressly deploy this