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Review of Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America: Re-Rooted Cultures, Identities, and Nations

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Reviews



WILLIAM G. ACREE JR. AND JUAN CARLOS GONZÁLEZ ESPITIA, EDS. *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America: Re-Rooted Cultures, Identities, and Nations*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2010. 312 pp.

Recent years have seen the publication of several excellent collections of essays devoted to nineteenth-century Latin American cultural studies. Works such as *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, edited by Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen, and special numbers of journals such as *Revista Iberoamericana's* issue on cultural change and periodical reading in nineteenth-century Latin America (January-March 2006), to adduce but two examples, have amplified our understanding of the complex ways in which hegemonic and nonhegemonic discourses functioned in the nineteenth century and how the divisions between elite and popular cultures were constructed and deconstructed. This collective scholarly labor has also done much to counteract and supplement the persuasive and powerful, but often totalizing, interpretations proposed by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* and Doris Sommer in *Foundational Fictions*. Acree and González Espitia's anthology may now be added to the extant corpus of such volumes. *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America* unites essays by historians and literary and cultural critics, all of whom examine different discursive phenomena from within rather than from without. The works have in common their desire to offer insight into movements, groups, and sociocultural manifestations that to date have not been studied from a cultural studies perspective. Thus Patricia Lapolla Swier's essay on José Martí finds space next to González Espitia's piece analyzing representations of syphilis in both "high" culture (poetry, fiction) and "low" culture (magazine advertisements). Indeed, the chapters here also share the refusal to privilege one form of discourse over another. It is welcome to find a collection offering essays that vary widely in terms of content, but that also maintain a similar theoretical approach.

The volume is organized into three thematic units: print culture and the power of images; parties and performances; and, finally, a section on "ideologies, revelations, and hidden nations." Framing the collection in this way casts the first two sections as focused on easily identifiable phenomena, while the third is positioned as a discussion of ideologies, as if the first two were free of ideology. Still, the commonality of the critical perspectives among almost all the essays gives *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America* a coherence that compensates for the rather forced aspect of the book's tripartite division.

Hugo Achugar's insightful "Foundational Images of the Nation in Latin America," translated deftly by Acree, opens the book. Achugar argues that

images were as central to the nation-building project as Sommer's foundational fictions, and analyzes a "high culture" painting—Juan Manuel Blanes's *El juramento de los Treinta y Tres Orientales* (1877)—as well as images that literally circulated on money and postage. He stresses the nonhegemonic nature of money and postage; private banks and postal systems held sway for much of the century, minting their own money and printing their own stamps. For Achugar this means that non-state powers participated in creating national imaginaries and foundational discourses. This essay is followed by Acree's own "Words, Wars and Public Celebrations: The Emergence of Rioplatense Print Culture," which asserts that print culture was crucial in the revolutionary period to royalists and pro-independence partisans alike. Acree acknowledges that it is difficult to assert that urban revolutionary-period newspapers would have reached a rural or illiterate audience, a fact that seems especially pointed after Achugar's careful dissection of visual culture's extended reach in the previous essay. This exemplifies how the essays in *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America* enter into dialogue with one another. Indeed, much of Acree's essay traces the interplay between print and visual cultures. For example, printed matter was publicly displayed and read aloud during festivals, while journals made written descriptions of those festivals available to those who did not attend the celebrations in person.

Next, Amy E. Wright uses the works of Justo Sierra O'Reilly to examine the links among serial novels, newspapers, and nation-building in Mexico. In what may well be the clearest sign here of how the field of nineteenth-century literary studies has evolved over the last twenty years, Wright manages to stress the link between novels and nation without once referencing Sommer. Wright could have made more of the fact that Sierra O'Reilly identified as a Yucatecan to explain his marginalization in Mexican literary history, but her essay does point to the fluidity with which authors navigated different print realms as they sought to advance particular national images. Last here is Michael Kenneth Huner's excellent "Toikove Ñane Retã! Republican Nationalism at the Battlefield Crossings of Print and Speech in Wartime Paraguay, 1867–1868," which analyzes the Paraguayan encampment of Paso Pucú as a lettered city in miniature. Huner examines the satirical, illustrated newspaper *Cabichui*, which promoted Paraguayan nationalism and anti-Brazilian, anti-black rhetoric to soldiers, and explains that the editors of *Cabichui* employed Guaraní vocabulary and concepts to foster in its readers (and listeners, as the newspaper was read aloud to illiterate soldiers) the idea of the Paraguayan nation.

The second section, "Cultures on Display," begins with Beatriz González-Stephan's impressive essay "Forms of Historic Imagination: Visual Culture, Historiography, and the Tropes of War in Nineteenth-Century Venezuela," also elegantly translated by Acree. González-Stephan investigates the ways in which historiographical production functions in visually-oriented societies, with a particular focus on the first National Fair in Venezuela in 1883. She reads the Fair as a "symbolic space where cultural manifestations were channeled to endorse the power of the state" (107) and her expert, far-ranging critique takes into account the historical and cultural context of the Fair, the architectural style of the building constructed for it, and the contents of the building. From this, González-Stephan draws larger conclusions about the relationships between elite

and popular discourses, among socioeconomic classes, and about the exercise of power and national consolidation in the nineteenth century.

Like González-Stephan, John Charles Chasteen uses a particular cultural episode to make a larger point. His piece on carnival celebrations in Lima, Havana, Rio, and Buenos Aires emphasizes the Iberian carnival's tradition of "the throwing game" and, in particular, the water fight. His lively essay indicates that the water fight, which was primarily between men and women and hence had erotic overtones, empowered women to attract male attention, and allowed different social classes to interact equally. Ultimately, he argues, carnival transgressions, as opposed to temporary inversions of social roles, can and often do result in social change. Stuart A. Day, too, examines the relationship between elite and popular culture in "Performing the Porfiriato: Federico Gamboa and the Negotiation of Power." Focusing on Gamboa's 1907 play *La venganza de la gleba*, Day asserts that the fact that the peasants in the play act respectfully toward the elites but give voice to a longing for freedom elsewhere allows for the possibility of expressing "counter-hegemonic opinions" (170) during the Porfiriato. He concludes that the play constitutes a critique of the regime from within, despite Gamboa's strong ties to Porfirio Díaz and his government.

The final section connects many of the theoretical and critical concerns of the previous ones: constructions of state and other hegemonic discourses; relationships between elites and popular classes; and, most vitally, the uncovering of the "hidden nations" referenced in this section's title, but evident throughout the collection—the marginalized groups whose stories have always been present, but have only begun to be (re)told in recent years. Thus, Terry Rugeley's "The Imponderable and the Permissible: Caste Wars, Culture Wars, and Porfirian Piety in the Yucatán Peninsula" addresses the connections between religion and popular cultures in Yucatán during the Porfiriato. Despite the title, there is little information in the essay on the Caste Wars; still, much of the article sheds new light on the Catholic Church's efforts to incorporate urban Mayas into Catholic life and practice and its corresponding failure to do the same for rural Mayas. In "Birds of a Feather: *Pollos* and the Nineteenth-Century Prehistory of Mexican Homosexuality," Christopher Conway examines the androgynous or effeminate figure of the *pollo* or dandy in nineteenth-century Mexico as a precursor of the "famous 41," the forty-one men arrested at a transvestite ball in 1901. Conway expertly critiques written and visual images of the *pollo* in novels, journalism, and caricatures. He unearths some mid-nineteenth-century Mexican texts condemning *pollos* as "deviants," and he concludes that while Mexican homophobia became more apparent in the Porfiriato, it arose from earlier cultural precedents associating homosexuals with weakness, frivolity, and womanishness.

Patricia Lapolla Swier also treats gender issues in "Unveiling the Mask of Modernity: A Critical Gendered Perspective of *Amistad funesta* and the Early Chronicles of José Martí." As she notes, while Europeans and North Americans often associated Latin Americans with the feminine, Martí reversed these characterizations in his writings as early as the 1880s. Swier argues that *Amistad funesta*'s love triangle is an allegory for U.S.-Latin American relations that undermines itself, because while Lucía is meant to represent the imperialist United States negatively, the character's energy and dynamism read as positive attributes.

Finally, the book concludes with Juan Carlos González Espitia's provocative "A Brief Syphilography of Nineteenth-Century Latin America." González Espitia uses literary and journalistic texts, including magazine advertisements, to trace changing attitudes toward the disease from the early 1800s, when it was divorced from any social consequences, to later in the century, when syphilis was discovered to be hereditary, resulting in a drive to protect the nation's endangered future. The struggle against syphilis mirrored other processes of modernization in Latin America as the continent's governments imitated European and North American procedures to control the illness.

Critical compilations sometimes run the risk of seeming disorganized or unfocused. *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, however, smartly curated by Acree and González Espitia, brings together essays that speak to cultural studies in its most useful incarnation: a field that illuminates our comprehension of the ways in which people thought, felt, and understood their physical, cultural, and intellectual environments. Scholars of nineteenth-century Latin America will find this book a rewarding, illuminating read, and a valuable critical tool.

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RUBÉN GALLO. *Freud's Mexico: Into the Wilds of Psychoanalysis*. Boston: MIT, 2010. 390 pp.

Freud's Mexico es mucho libro, original, importante. Es, para empezar, un hermoso objeto, de esos que pocas editoriales académicas se arriesgan a producir. La tipografía, la afortunada mezcla de ilustraciones para el goce analítico en blanco y negro e ilustraciones a color para el goce estético, las citas importantes en la lengua original—algo tan indispensable y tan impensable para los libros en inglés—, el cuidado en los detalles y la innovación en el diseño . . . Todo revela la mano de un diseñador de raza. Enhorabuena por MIT Press que aún apuesta por el arte del libro-objeto.

Freud's Mexico, además, es dos libros en uno: el primero trata de la recepción del pensamiento de Freud en México; el segundo, sobre los Méxicos de Freud. Pero en verdad, *Freud's Mexico* es un verdadero ensayo: oficio de buscar, explorar, unir cabos en apariencia desconectados. Además, los ensayos se complementan con pequeñas viñetas narrativas, a veces excelentemente logradas, en las que el autor, libre del deber de explicar, ofrece algún eco o anécdota que ilustra el ensayo correspondiente.

Finalmente, *Freud's Mexico* es el diario de un cazador de instantes. Gallo no colecciona instantes porque sean evidencias sino porque son tiempo. *Freud's Mexico* funciona como una colección de documentos, imágenes, novelas, poemas, películas y objetos que no bien caen en las manos de Gallo viran en diminutos alephs para otear burbujas culturales plenas de simultaneidad histórica. El autor a un tiempo crea y recrea, aumenta y reduce esa simultaneidad, haciéndola caber y existir en el restringido formato de un ensayo.

Aquí y allá, el profesor Gallo lanza los consabidos halagos a las modas académicas. Que el experto en turno juzgue en *Freud's Mexico* el "theorizing" o "unthe-

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