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Review / Reseña

William Acree and Juan Carlos Gonzalez Espitia, eds., *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America: Re-Rooted Cultures, Identities, and Nations*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2009.

New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Political Culture

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Edited collections are notorious for the challenge they present to editors to pull articles into a coherent package; the difficulties increase when the authors approach the topic from different disciplines. William Acree and Juan Carlos González Espitia have produced an anthology that successfully showcases cultural studies approaches to interpreting diverse texts as well as visual images: essays in their *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America: Re-Rooted Cultures, Identities, and Nations* collectively provide a new view of cultures and identities (particularly ethnic and gender) in nineteenth-century Spanish America (no chapter focuses on

Brazil). In terms of the third topic promised in the subtitle, however, some of the articles that explicitly address nation building make assumptions about what constitutes that process without fully engaging with the historical and social science scholarship on the topic. Perhaps substituting “modernities” for “nations” would have better reflected this third theme unifying the collection. Nonetheless, if readers come to the book with a broad view they will be rewarded by insights—what the editors call “snapshots” that “communicate an organic view of society” (4)—that occur when literary scholars analyze diverse cultural artifacts within their historical context and when historians look at societies with an eye to cultural manifestations.

Of the chapters that address head on the theme of nation building, one of the lingering impressions for this reader (whether or not it was the intention of the editors) was how much the cultural and political elites of nineteenth-century Latin America engaged with universal ideals and attempted to project a cosmopolitan modernity rather than constructing particular, locally-rooted national identities. In the opening chapter, Hugo Achugar examines “foundational images” of nations, such as the 1877 painting by Uruguayan Juan Manuel Blanes entitled *El juramento de los Treinta y Tres Orientales*, which the state subsequently reproduced in textbooks, stamps and other official venues. Achugar notes that *El juramento* projects “an imaginary that is militarist, masculine, and white” (18). One might add that the scene, with the exception of the particular national flag, could have taken place in any number of new Latin American nations. Achugar’s review of nineteenth-century Latin American currencies, by contrast, turns up examples of indigenous women symbolically representing the new nations alongside white, male heroes and classical symbols. As Rebecca Earle has shown elsewhere, however, such distinctive images were short-lived.¹ In the following chapter, William Acree Jr. explores the simultaneous development of a patriotic print culture in Río de la Plata and the ceremonies at which such texts were celebrated and read aloud. While he references orders to print the declaration of independence

¹ Rebecca Earle, “*Sobre Héroes y Tumbas: National Symbols in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America*,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 85 (2005), 375-416.

in Quechua and Aymara and the influence of gaucho vernacular on the verses of Bartolomé Hidalgo, many symbols (such as the Phrygian cap of liberty) and the ideals conveyed by both words and symbols were those of a more universal republicanism than a distinctive nationalism. Those of us who study the emergence of nation states in Latin America should be attentive to these tensions between local identities and broader political concepts, especially in the decades immediately after independence.

The Río de la Plata region had no pre-Columbian empire to serve as a potential source of national identity, but the articles in the collection on Mexico suggest that local elites there also hesitated to draw upon indigenous identities in imagining their new nation, and they were even less interested in incorporating contemporary native peoples into the polity. Amy Wright's examination of serial fiction in mid-nineteenth-century Yucatán highlights the goal of local elites to produce a homegrown literature to rival European imports. Focusing particularly on statesman and author Justo Sierra O'Reilly, whose corpus has received little attention despite being among the first fiction to be created in Mexico after independence, she demonstrates the author's multiple ties to local (and through these national) politics and the contemporary understandings of the importance of literature to social progress. It is striking, however, that while noting his literary preoccupation with the threat to the nation posed by foreign piracy, Wright does not comment on how his novels apparently ignored the place of the Maya in the nation despite being written and serialized as the "caste wars" between the indigenous and Hispanic populations were commencing. In a chapter that provides an overview of the attempts by the Catholic Church in the Yucatán to remain relevant in the face of liberal secularism throughout the nineteenth century, Terry Rugley argues that the ecclesiastical leadership successfully allied with urban Hispanic civic associations with which they shared the goal of moralizing the lower classes. This strategy of targeting the literate population through a new print culture of pamphlets and periodicals, however, meant that clerics increasingly turned their attention away from the rural Maya who, in turn, took advantage of this space to practice their own forms of syncretic and popular spirituality. Stuart Day reveals the

difficulties for writers in addressing the social divisions within the nation by focusing on a play penned only years before the Mexican revolution by Federico Gamboa, a bureaucrat like the Yucatecan Sierra O'Reilly, but one who owed personal loyalty to the regime of Porfirio Díaz. Gamboa cautiously advocated reform from above to avoid radical change from below through his portrayal of the travails of a landed family, related through illegitimate relations to the peons on their hacienda. While these relations were certainly rooted in colonialism, the novel depicts social distinctions in class rather than ethnic terms. Day explores how his characters spoke a veiled language of negotiation that in some ways reflected the author's own circumscribed position as well as resonating with caricatures that identified the multiple "masks" covering the repressive elements of the Porfirian regime.

Two strong chapters that bridge the first and second sub-sections of the collection offer an intriguing contrast of political cultures that highlighted local identities in the case of Paraguay and a more cosmopolitan modernity in the case of Venezuela. Michael Huner analyzes a satirical newspaper produced in 1867 and 1868, during Paraguay's war with Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. Two European-educated journalists attempted to inspire patriotism in soldiers, mostly illiterates to whom the journal would be read aloud, through the use of Guaraní terms along with humorous stories and images. Huner demonstrates not simply the use of Guaraní, but also skillfully interprets the targeted use of particular expressions that were refashioned under the imperative of national defense. For example, journalists encouraged soldiers to identify with the nation by extending the term "Retã," literally "place of origin" or "familial village," to encompass the broader concept of a homeland as *patria*. The wartime press labeled the enemy with the pejorative *kamba*, which had entered the Guaraní language under colonialism to refer specifically to African slaves, to rally Paraguayan troops against Brazilians identified as downtrodden, servile and racially inferior. Beatriz González-Stephan, by contrast, explores the tendency among Venezuelan elites to avoid images of their country that would reinforce European orientalist impressions of the country's tropical primitiveness. Instead, Venezuelan pavilions at world

fairs favored the Neo-Gothic style popular in industrializing England and paintings of independence battles and heroes projected values of militarism that Venezuela's leaders would have shared with those of other Latin American and western nations.

The remaining articles in the collection fall even more on the cultural side of political culture, but reveal fascinating aspects of gender ambivalence and anxiety in Latin American societies of the nineteenth century. John Chasteen insightfully considers the survival of pre-Lenten carnival festivities in nineteenth-century cities, particularly the water fights between young men (usually roaming the streets) and women (often from their balconies). Focusing on how these games allowed for *transgression* of social boundaries, particularly of gender but also of class and race, he conjectures on how they opened possibilities for incremental changes in everyday social mores that would have been less likely to result from carnivalesque *inversions*, which ultimately reinforced the hierarchies only briefly mocked. Christopher Conway explores a different sort of gender transgression in textual and pictorial representations of the figure of the "pollo," a nineteenth-century Mexican dandy whose obsession with fashion, aristocratic indolence and emotional outbursts rendered his character effeminate. Although the figure was not explicitly linked to homosexual practices, Conway demonstrates that he served as a foil to the virile and productive masculinity that was necessary for national progress. Patricia Lapolla Swier analyzes a transgressive female character in José Martí's only novel, *Amistad funesta*, who embodied both the positive and negative attributes of material progress at the expense of spiritual and moral development that Martí attributed to the United States in his other writings. Swier concludes that while the author's goal was to warn Cubans about the dangers of close relations with their seductive and powerful Northern neighbor, the character of Lucía also offered an alternative model of strong womanhood. Finally, through an innovative examination of discussions of syphilis in both literature and medicinal advertisements, Juan Carlos González Espitia similarly shows the ambivalence of Latin Americans toward foreigners, in this case Europeans, as the source of both progress (including in medicine) as well as moral and physical degeneracy.

It is impossible to do justice to every chapter of an edited collection in the space of a short review, and each reader will engage with the anthology according to her or his own interests and viewpoints. *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America* provides a model for bringing different disciplinary methodologies to diverse print and visual sources, and anyone interested in Latin American cultural studies should find several essays that provide new insights and suggest new directions for the field. As in most cultural studies, questions of the reception of print and visual culture remain largely unaddressed because the sources that might provide answers are notoriously difficult to locate or assess. The most successful chapters were those that analyzed in depth a particular text, group of images, or cultural phenomenon rather than trying to provide a sweeping overview. By engaging in close readings, attentive to the complex meanings of words or symbols, these authors demonstrate the means by which Spanish Americans, especially elites, imagined new cultures and societies—whether in terms of nationalism or modernity—during the century following independence.