

### Review/Reseña

Kari Soriano Salkjelsvik and Felipe Martínez-Pinzón, eds. *Revisar el costumbrismo: Cosmopolitismo, pedagogías y modernización en Iberoamérica*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016.

### An Expansive and Renewed *Costumbrismo*

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The word *costumbrismo* came into vogue at the end of the nineteenth century and was accompanied, at least in literary circles, by a whiff of condescension. While the *Diccionario de la lengua española* currently defines it as “atención que se presta al retrato de las costumbres típicas de un país o región,” late nineteenth-century observers took a more censorious tack. Miguel de Unamuno alluded to “la invasión de las minucias fotográficas” in 1895, and a decade or so later a Spanish book reviewer would define costumbrismo’s object as “la vida superficial de los pueblos.” By these definitions the term functioned reductively. A writer might be said to practice “costumbrismo” among other techniques, but the moniker of “costumbrista” would suggest a writer of limited scope and, by Unamuno’s reckoning, similarly limited importance.

Kari Soriano Salkjelsvik and Felipe Martínez-Pinzón's new edited collection, *Revistar el costumbrismo: Cosmopolitismo, pedagogías y modernización en Iberoamérica* seeks to demonstrate the expansiveness of the term. The volume consists of eleven critical essays that analyze primary texts ranging from novels to poetry to newspaper chronicles. Transatlantic and multi-lingual, these essays consider costumbrista writers from countries that include Spain (Galicia), Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina. Taken together they reveal how the analysis of the costumbrista approach can uncover new possibilities for rethinking a number of the thematic conundrums of 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin American studies: the tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, the pedagogical impulse behind modernizing projects, and the power relations that spurred capitalist development.

What precisely does costumbrismo mean for 21<sup>st</sup> century scholars seeking to understand the 19<sup>th</sup>? Both the introduction and Ana Peñas Ruiz's chapter directly following it give this question detailed attention, with a special focus on its internal contradictions and the paradoxes it invokes. Soriano Salkjelsvik and Martínez Pinzón divide their collection into three sections dealing with cosmopolitanism, pedagogy, and modernization. While these categories necessarily overlap, they have the advantage of demonstrating costumbrismo's versatility—it's a concept capable of crossing oceans and national borders and one that embodies the global dimension of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Latin America.

Peñas-Ruiz's chapter calls for "plurales teorías del costumbrismo" (48), and for the recognition that painting national types in words presupposes an international frame of reference for reader and writer alike. Patricia D'Allemand and Daniel Serravalle de Sá answer this call in essays that respectively analyze José María Samper's belief in costumbrismo as an "instrumento de investigación" (64), and the Brazilian tradition of making unfavorably caricatured Britons appear as stock characters in prose fiction and comic strips. D'Allemand takes aim at what she sees as the fossilized debate on Colombian costumbrismo, a discussion that devolves to a traditionalist defense of costumbrista writing or a progressive condemnation. She maintains that both sides of the argument tend to de-historicize the examples they cite and that together they contribute to a vision of pre-modernismo writings as inherently simple and therefore accessible to simplistic readings. Into the impasse she injects the writings of José María Samper, who considered himself capable of practicing and critiquing costumbrismo without being defined by it. For his part, Serravalle de Sá details a widely shared Brazilian anxiety about British capital and influence. He also

points out that the same writers whose nationalism leads them to condemn punctuality itself—a trait associated with the British—as more suited to machines than human beings, were themselves largely educated in Europe. He notes that the term “costumbrismo” never took hold in the Brazilian context, and he argues persuasively that the description of social customs and types was as important in an independent monarchy as in the neighboring republics.

The essays that make up the center of the volume turn the focus to costumbrismo’s use as a tool for defining and disciplining the nation. Here the detailed portrayal of social types reveals a desire to classify and reign in the excesses of a post-independence world inhabited by liberal projects and colonial society. Emmanuel Velayos analyzes the idea of social custom in the political writings of Simón Rodríguez and Juan Bautista Alberdi. At first this seems like an unlikely choice, since the writings in question do not engage in costumbrismo, but Velayos’s analysis traces the perceived role of social customs in shaping the body politic as an important force in both thinkers’ political imaginary. The republican belief in the power of social custom as an obstacle or possible aid to new national projects is therefore intimately connected to the literary practice of costumbrismo.

Andrea Castro performs close readings of social scenes in *Stella* (1905) and *Mecha Iturbe* (1906), popular works by the Argentine novelist Emma de la Barra, written under the pen name César Duayen. Castro argues that the scenes of social interaction in these novels come to resemble “cuadros de gabinete” (120), and that careful attention to sight and sound yields insight into the relationship between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. In her reading even the most overtly nationalist characters sometimes cannot help hearing and seeing the traces of indigeneity and immigration that they would prefer to forget.

The nation with its seams and fractures also takes on special importance in Mercédez López Rodríguez’s examination of whiteness in the works of Colombian costumbristas. Her study focuses on Manuel Ancízar’s *Peregrinaciones de Alpha* (1853) and Eugenio Díaz’s *Bruna, la carbonera* (1879). In both texts she finds the equation of whiteness with beauty and a desire to effectively “whiten” the country’s indigenous population. López Rodríguez’s study thus points to the broader question of the nation-building work that costumbrista writers hoped their texts would perform and the suppositions and prejudices that fueled it.

Questions of citizenship and legitimation concern not only the observed but also the observer in Natalia Ruiz Rubia’s analysis of the Mexican cronista Guillermo

Prieto. Noting Prieto's predilection for the figure of the *flâneur*, which she describes as "un ciudadano legitimado por su buen gusto" (174), Ruiz Rubio goes on to detail this role as that of modeling both new aesthetic criteria and the critical judgment needed to apply them. The tasks this judgment performs include categorization by gender, race, and class, and the resulting synthesis of aesthetics and taxonomy makes the costumbrista text a kind of national showroom, or "escaparate textual de la nación."

To this tension between the desire for an unbroken national aesthetic and plural realities included within it, the book's last third adds the problem of nostalgia and costumbrismo's mystification of the past. Costumbrismo emerges as a tool with a paradox of its own, serving in different instances to hide and reveal the economic changes that made the longed-for social types and landscapes disappear. Leila Gómez focuses on Juana Manuela Gorriti, arguably the most famous woman of letters in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Latin America. Emphasizing Gorriti's background—her birth in the Andean city of Salta and her experiences in Bolivia—Gómez argues for the importance of "altoperuanidad" in her *oeuvre*. The region of "Alto Perú" crosses national boundaries in the post-independence period, and Gómez sees its function in Gorriti's work as that of a "comunidad de intereses" (191) that reveals "las arbitrariedades de la historia y el espacio nacional" (206). Costumbrismo thus manages to question national myths as well as to reify them.

Margarita Serje examines the Colombian hacienda in Medardo Rivas's *Los trabajadores de tierra caliente* (1899). She argues that Medardo's vision of harmonious and productive tropical spaces invokes Eden and conspicuously leaves out the structural violence that made the haciendas possible. Felipe Martínez Pinzón's study of favored costumbrismo types advances a similar argument on a broader scale. Along with a pithy definition of the term as "hijo y producto del periodismo" on the one hand and "madre a la vez de la etnografía y de las incipientes ciencias sociales latinoamericanas" (233), he takes a close look at the humans that embody cash crop economies—"el tabaquero, el cosechero o la cigarrera"—and identifies these types as figures created by costumbrismo with the goal of making capitalism vanish (233).

In light of this skeptical reading of the costumbrista's motives and effects, the final essay, by Germán Labrador Méndez, strikes an unexpected note. Labrador Méndez shifts the geographical focus from the tropics to Galicia, and there he finds a different approach to landscape at work in the poems of Rosalía de Castro. Instead of using description to make fissures and sutures and violence disappear, Castro's poems practice, he asserts, "una poética de la desposesión" (252), in which self-conscious

attempts to describe Galician countryside as a sacred space serve as intentional counterpoints to the process of economic and agricultural development: “el texto del poeta sobre el paisaje invierte el texto del notario” (269).

This final opposition between the notary and the poet is particularly effective because it underlines costumbrismo’s ability to work in vectors that are 180 degrees apart according the author’s intentions and execution. A technique capable of such versatility must be the beginning rather than the end of an interpretive process. If the reductive vision of costumbrismo seeks to freeze texts into small and harmless boxes, Soriano Saljelsvik and Martínez-Pinzón’s collection gestures convincingly towards an expansive alternative.