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**Review / Reseña**

## **The Incomplete American**

**Christopher Conway**

University of Texas—Arlington

Gene Bell-Villada. *Overseas American: Growing Up Gringo in the Tropics*.  
University of Mississippi Press, 2005

Gene Bell-Villada's *Overseas American: Growing Up Gringo in the Tropics* is a vital addition to Globalization Studies, as well as to an emergent and lesser known body of literature on American kids raised outside of the United States. These kids, known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs), grow up between cultures without being able to fully claim ownership over any of them. The children of missionaries, diplomats, military personnel and transnational business people, these cosmopolitans are saturated in the culture and language of the host countries in which they are raised while maintaining an imaginary and often confused connection to their American

nationality. In a relatively small field of scholarship and writing on the subject, Bell-Villada's worldly memoir will undoubtedly be a particularly rich resource for TCKs and their families in the future. As an autobiographical case-study, it crystallizes the psychological, spiritual and cultural consequences of living unmoored from the nation-state. More importantly, however, *Overseas American* is a memoir that deserves a mainstream and academic audience for its clear-sighted and memorable treatment of Latin American history and culture, plural identities and family drama.

In *Overseas American*, Bell-Villada tells the story of his childhood experiences in Puerto Rico, Cuba and Venezuela in the 1940's and 1950's, and his attempts to find himself as an adult in the United States. As the son of an itinerant, Anglo-American businessman working in the Caribbean, Bell-Villada and his younger brother Kanani are shuttled from Puerto Rico to Venezuela to Cuba and then back to Venezuela where Bell-Villada graduated from high school. Later, in the U.S., Bell-Villada struggles to find a place for himself in the world. In this regard, Bell-Villada's memoir is rich in historical and cultural sketches about Puerto Rico, Cuba and Venezuela. For example, Bell-Villada's description of his experiences at the Havana Military Academy in Bautista's Cuba on the eve of the Cuban Revolution of 1958 provides a fascinating, eyewitness account of the school's military culture, political atmosphere and sexual mores. Bell-Villada underlines the cruelty of the Academy's cadets, but also their political maturity and intense political disagreements, which at one point results in a cafeteria food-fight over Fidel Castro. "By Spring 1957," writes Bell-Villada, "political discussion had grown so intense and heated that, at lunch one day, a top school official announced over the loudspeaker system an indefinite ban on 'all conversations dealing with political subjects' anywhere on the HMA premises" (85). Particularly fascinating is his discussion of homoeroticism, homophobia and sexual abuse at the school.

In a similar documentary vein, *Overseas American* also provides invaluable information about the Colegio Americano of Caracas in the late 50's, and the identity politics of its American and Venezuelan students. When Nixon visits Venezuela in 1959 and is spat upon by Venezuelan demonstrators, North American students and Venezuelan students come head to head over politics, interrupting the apolitical, universal rhythms of adolescence. Yet, to be North American at the Colegio Americano did not have a single meaning; Bell-Villada notes how some North American students identified almost entirely with Venezuela, while others identified self-consciously as North American. I was particularly interested in Bell-Villada's description of the racist undercurrents at the school, where a teacher made racist pronouncements about segregation while students used the "N" word. My own experiences as a TCK in the Dominican Republic during the 1980's, almost exactly thirty years after Bell-Villada's experiences at the Colegio Americano in Caracas, confirm that the racism described by Bell-Villada should not be dismissed or excused as some kind of historical anachronism specific to the 1950's. For kids raised in walled compounds away from the impoverished masses of brown or black peoples of their host countries, served hand and foot by native maids, cooks and chauffeurs, prejudice comes very easy. One of my math teachers once joked about how science had proved that bananas made people stupid, unlocking the secret to why Dominicans were incompetent.

On another level, however, Bell-Villada's *Overseas American* is about much more than cataloguing cultural differences, expatriate subcultures and historical vignettes about Puerto Rico, Cuba and Venezuela. There is a powerful, dark undercurrent in his narrative that deals with his relationships with his parents and brother. Bell-Villada's Hawaiian mother seems to have been a sensitive, intelligent and talented woman trapped in a difficult marriage with an absent husband obsessed with work. Bell-Villada's memoir contains chilling

scenes of domestic unrest and psychological abuse, including the shocking story of how his father forcibly placed his mother in a mental asylum on one occasion. Other descriptions of Bell-Villada's father underscore his cruel, egotistical nature, and come to a crescendo in the second half of the book, when he takes a central role in the psychological dramas of the author. Although Bell-Villada and his brother ultimately cut off contact with their father, his shadow seems to have holed itself up in the author's heart, tormenting him into adulthood and depriving him of peace. Yet, this is not the only psychological-drama that underpins *Overseas American*, making its pages compelling and moving. Bell-Villada is also plagued by guilt over his failure to support his younger brother Kanani. The first glimpse of this occurs when, in a moment of despair, young Kanani breaks down and opens his heart to his brother about his love for him and their absent mother and younger sister. In the moment, Bell-Villada does not –cannot – react, but now he wishes he had. "Oh," writes Bell-Villada, "to be able to turn back the clock to that one moment, to hold Kanani in my arms and cry along with him and tell him how moved I am by his feeling about the three of us that way" (88). Later, as adults, Bell-Villada's radical politics and his lack of personal compass will result in a more serious rift between them. Although they eventually reconcile, grief over the unfulfilled possibilities of their relationship as boys beats at the heart of *Overseas American* and fills its pages with melancholy and regret. In some ways, the memoir is a gift of remembrance from Bell-Villada to Kanani.

In addition to the narrative strands that join travelogue with painful family drama, *Overseas American* also weaves the threads of what it means to live on the margins of national, ethnic and racial categories. For example, depending on the situation he finds himself in, Bell-Villada self-identifies at different points of his childhood and adolescence as Puerto Rican, Venezuelan and Latino. Bell-Villada's

appearance also creates confusion, and makes him hard “to read” racially. His Eurasian features lead to a striking comment when he is attending the Havana Military Academy: “Oye chiquito, qué extraño eres” (70). When Bell-Villada and Kanani visit the segregated south briefly, they are confused about whether they are “colored” or not, although Kanani must face a threatening situation in a whites-only restroom. In adulthood, as he negotiates his rage over U.S. imperialism, Bell-Villada deploys his chameleon-like nature to playfully poke at an American tourist in Paris by claiming a Vietnamese identity, and saying that his rural village had been destroyed by the United States military. Thus, Bell-Villada’s upbringing and family background ultimately empower him to lay claim to a variety of ethnic personas and nationalities, or to none at all. In one of the revealing epigraphs that Bell-Villada places at the head of a chapter, Ruth Useem and Ann Baker Cottrell, two commentators of the TCK phenomenon, observe that TCKs feel at home “everywhere and nowhere” (219).

Much of what is in *Overseas American* is familiar to me, as a grown-up TCK, and will be very affirming to other “Global Nomads.” For example, Bell-Villada wishes that he had had a religious upbringing, just so that he could have been “*something*, rather than merely an in-between Puerto Rican or an incomplete American” (12). The paradox, in my experience, is that such nostalgia for having belonged at some point to something greater than oneself (faith, nation, ideology), coexists with an almost constitutional resistance to such notions in adulthood. In my case, as a traveler who has never had fixed roots, imaginary or real, I don’t take instruction well and enjoy the *solo*, untethered life. Another fascinating aspect of the marginality of the TCK experience relates to how Bell-Villada was raised in fragments of North American popular culture while being removed from the nation’s shores. His exposure to Hollywood films and North American comics in the 40’s and 50’s provided cultural

awareness of an illusory, magical homeland removed from the language, customs and mores of Latin America. This mirrors my own childhood experience in the 70's, when my brother John would send me weighty packages of bright Marvel and D.C. comics in sacred, tan envelopes covered with stamps. Those packages were magical repositories of my fantasies about what it meant to be an "American," of the thrill of a faraway land of gold and honey no less fantastic than the legends of El Dorado, which enchanted early Spanish explorers of the New World.

The experience of marginality that I am describing here may seem abstract, but one of the virtues of Bell-Villada's memoir is the way it is rooted in the realities of day-to-day family life, and in the confusion of childhood and adolescence. As a TCK, I found Bell-Villada's description of family life to be especially moving and revealing of my own status as an "incomplete American":

Kanani and I thus lived a vast absence, day after day, year upon year. Our parents aside, we knew virtually no blood ties, no caring, quirky grandmamas or grandpapas somewhere nearby to bring us into past history, no uncles, aunts, our cousins to link us to the continental Forty-Eight or to insular Hawaii...The family tree's branches were minimal—just us two—and its roots were nonexistent. Continuity, connectedness—they were in a word nil. (15)

The most mundane aspects of a "normal," rooted life in the U.S. do not apply to Global Nomads. Such absence and erasure extend branches out into the self, intertwining with more universal feelings of childhood and adolescent solitude. That is why—and here I will only speak for myself—that when people used to ask me where I was from, I often lied. To uncover my multiple origins meant becoming strange to my interlocutors, having to explain, and dealing with the same stock responses over and over again.

For readers interested in the institutional history of the study of Latin American literature in the U.S. Academy, *Overseas American* also contains invaluable anecdotes about what it used to

be like to study non-European and North American literature in the sixties and seventies. For example, Bell-Villada tells a hilarious anecdote about trying to convince his Harvard dissertation advisor that Alejo Carpentier is a Marxist writer.

Later that month I write a long letter to Carpentier himself and send it to his cultural attaché office at the Cuban Embassy in Paris. I recount to him my experience and ask the great writer, whose Marxism I had simply taken for granted, if he could possibly help me out and resolve the confusion by letting me know if he consider himself a Marxist. (242)

Carpentier actually writes back and tartly ends his long letter defending his Marxist identity with this sentence: “You may inform your teacher that I am a Marxist...” But the letter does not settle the dispute between Professor and graduate student; Bell-Villada’s advisor will only concede that Carpentier *says* that he is a Marxist, as opposed to *being* a Marxist writer. As Kurt Vonnegut might write: *and so it goes*. Reading *Overseas American* made me realize that younger scholars of Latin American literature need Bell-Villada and other pioneering scholars in the field to document the story of the rise of Spanish and Latin American literature in the U.S. academy. Bell-Villada has wisely realized that this memoir is not the place for an in-depth exploration of this topic but the inclusion of anecdotes such as the one above about Carpentier will delight and fascinate many academic readers.

Gene Bell-Villada’s *Overseas American* is a special book that can bring together different constituencies of readers: mainstream readers of non-fiction, academicians and members of the TCK community. Bell-Villada’s light touch when it comes to making historical and cultural comparisons, and the way he introduces a web of literary references that resonate with the places, periods and experiences that he describes, make his narrative a delight to read, and underscore how lucky his students at Williams College are to have him as a guide of culture and literature. Moreover, *Overseas*

*American* is a welcome and fresh intervention in the crowded field of narratives that deal with marginalized and plural identities in a post-nationalist world. Unlike some kinds of identity-politics literature, which draws their power and appeal from ethnicity and nostalgia for an imaginary homeland, Bell-Villada's memoir provides something different. In a global world, you'd be surprised at the kinds of people who are not at home here, there or anywhere.