A Contra corriente
Una revista de estudios latinoamericanos

Vol. 19, Num. 2 (Winter 2022): 288-295

Review / Reseña

Olson, Christa J. *American Magnitude. Hemispheric Vision and Public Feeling in the United States*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2021. 244 pp.

José Castellanos

University of Notre Dame

Like all ideas, that of the United States being "the greatest country in the world" has a history. Told by Christa J. Olson, it is one of violent territorial expansion, an exceptional relationship with sublime landscapes, unparalleled discoveries of grand civilizations, and hemispheric solidarity imposed through wartime propaganda. A story in which greatness means not only eminence or distinction, but also supreme size and importance, sublimity, inevitability, and uniqueness.

The origin of that "greatness" is tightly related to the invention of the United States of America as simply "America." Olson narrates the history of mobilized ideas and feelings which in turn produced a "sense of America" that not only included what is inside the official borders but also the whole continent, a "hemispheric vision." *American Magnitude* tells a story in which that "sense of America" needs rhetorical "magnitude" or "megethos," that is, the establishment of importance, a link with the sublime, and the use of the senses and the feelings (13). Here, vision—the corporeal sense of sight—has a very important place as a starting point (18). Those procedures, Olson argues, are closely related to colonialism and racialization, which means that the "American" was constituted through the exclusion of the Black and the Indigenous (17), that is, the "other."

In *American Magnitude,* Olson undertakes a mixed analysis in which history, textual and visual rhetoric, and decolonial, feminist and critical race theory are interwoven to read the different ways in which the United States built its own image of "greatness," its unique "Americanness" to see—and produce—distinct visions of "America." Such ideas, we can see through the chapters, have evolved as a *feeling*: the public feeling of American magnitude. Olson goes deep into the archives and retrieves multiple objects like lithographs, paintings, photos, maps, animated films, private letters, newspaper articles, and internal communications to read both the discourses produced and the shapes they took in the public's feelings and minds. *American Magnitude* offers a "thoroughly embodied visual rhetoric" (20), where pictures (and other visual and textual objects, I would add) are not just interpreted, but also *felt* (21).

Chapter one deals with the US-Mexican War, a now-forgotten event that was obsessively documented (31). Olson focuses on lithographs by Nathaniel Currier to show three aspects that contributed to the feeling of American magnitude: the incorporation of the Mexican territory (53), the superiority of US American armies and individual heroes (56-57), and their particularity over generic conquered land (58). Through those lithographs, the possession of new territory was made "inevitable and natural," because racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and greed were not enough to create a "new normalcy" (52). But the graphic content had a counterpoint in the letters of soldiers who informed their loved ones of the difficulties of the war and the harshness of that new territory, depicted as a barren land where cultivation and civilization were deemed impossible.

Olson argues that the "public feeling" of magnitude is created through a process of "accumulation" composed of three "paradigms": 1) proliferation, 2) sedimentation, and 3) precipitation (42-46). Throughout time, some feelings prevail, others are forgotten or covered. And, like the objects that first produced them, feelings also accumulate. It is through this slow process of accumulation that a sense of "America," a feeling of the nation's boundaries and limits, was built (64). That is one of the major contributions of the first chapter: the claim that the close relationship between rhetorical devices and public feelings is complicated because it mixes diverse elements and produces consequences that may seem contradicting. Olson claims that the slow "accumulation of feelings" (32) made it possible to accept that the aggression on another republic was part of US "manifest destiny." Through the accumulation of territory and widespread documentation in images and texts, the accumulation of

feelings contributed to create a new normality in which a terrible war was forgotten, but its outcome was praised.

That said, at the end of chapter one, it is still unclear how the specifics of that process work. Although *accumulation* turns out to be a very useful tool, it does not seem to offer a detailed explanation of the progression between its different phases. Why did magnitude end up prevailing? What made it the only feeling accumulated, over shame, anger, or rejection? The debate over how necessary (or even possible) these "explanations" are, is still open. Although it would be unfair to demand them if they exceed the objectives of Olson's research.

Chapter two deals with the South American paintings of Frederic E. Church (1826-1900), particularly those of the Cotopaxi volcano in the Ecuadorian Andes, which were considered for generations as profoundly U.S. American, although they didn't represent a U.S. American landscape. Olson argues that this paradoxical "Americanness" consists of a double process: 1) Church's first paintings of Cotopaxi were seen as metaphors for the social unrest of the U.S. Civil War (72-76), and 2) the Andean territories themselves were understood to be there for the U.S. to occupy through their White, settler-colonialist, Christian, masculine gaze (79-82).

That double process needs a kind of narrative that focuses on "exceptionalism, destiny, and magnitude" (71). But that narrative always has counter-stories that complicate it, speak of its cracks, and question its very basis. To do so, Olson relies on critical race theorists and scholars of Indigenous rhetoric to read Church's diaries of his voyages through South America. In those diaries, Olson finds that Church's experiences in the Ecuadorian Andes were far from being only sublime and without obstacles. There, he faced weather difficulties he couldn't predict and was lost in languages he didn't fully understand. Although he barely mentions them by name, he also needed the aid of local Kichwa men who knew the places, routes, and ways to do the ascent (91-93). Olson concludes that "the widely distributed feelings of sublime, powerful, scientific sight that Church transmitted through his paintings must be set in relation to the knowledge and story of his Kichwa interlocutors" (94).

Olson's analysis of Church's paintings is a sharp tool for the understanding of many other stories of landscape art in Latin America. It helps us understand, for example, the relationship between European and mestizo scientists-explorers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with both foreign and local artists whose projects were to understand and represent what was seen as South America's strongest contribution to the modern world: its exuberant nature.

In chapter three we revisit—albeit transformed—some of the ideas presented in chapters one and two. Here, Olson focuses on Hiram Bingham's Peruvian expeditions at Yale (1911-1915) and analyzes internal technical documents, photographs, magazine, and newspaper articles, as well as the "archaeological" practices of the team. Chapter three describes and traces the genealogy of a narrative that still permeates what is said and thought about Machu Picchu even today (101-102).

Olson paints a portrait of a "discovery" very much influenced by Bingham's ideas of greatness, as created by a threefold process of discovery, invention, and revelation (105). Relying upon Edmundo O'Gorman's identification of the first two, Olson argues that the process of transforming the ruins into the "lost city of the Inkas" was one of production through "public dissemination of the thing invented" (108). It all started with Bingham's claim that it was he who "discovered" Machu Picchu. Bingham portrayed himself as the first Westerner that saw it as it was, described it, and showed it to the Western world, just like Columbus did with America. This meant that local populations historically connected to Machu Picchu needed to be erased from the narrative. Bingham did so by stating that all those before him lacked the capacity—the greatness—to see what was before their eyes. Machu Picchu, the product of a great lost civilization, could only be seen by a similar great people: the American people (124-127).

Olson argues that Bingham's expedition was, from the beginning, planned to produce Machu Picchu's greatness. An analysis of the internal technical documents concludes that their emphasis was not on doing proper archeological research, but on the proliferation and accumulation of photographs and artifacts, which in practice meant carrying out illegal actions to bypass the Peruvian authorities' restrictions on the export of archeological material.

These procedures were paired with the textual construction of the expeditions as arduous, achievable only by skilled, White scientist-explorers who could reach the sites, recognize them, and reveal them to the world. The narratives published in magazines and newspapers in the U.S., Olson claims, invite the readers to participate in that discovery and revelation (127-136). Nonetheless, in this chapter, Olson focuses solely on the rhetorical objects themselves and does not discuss their actual reception by the broader public, as was the case in previous chapters. The claims about what the public must have felt and believed are made solely on what Olson interprets as the function of those photographs and texts.

The discovery-invention-revelation of Machu Picchu was also based on what Olson calls "strategic opacity" (136), that is, that "revelation was founded on erasure" (139). Not only were the Quechua workers erased from the public narrative to better put the agency on Bingham and his team (the true discoverers), Espíritu Pampa and Vitcos—the two other sites that the expeditions encountered—were also forgotten because they couldn't be used to tell the story of unseen greatness due to their highly syncretic characteristics (138-139). That, Olson claims, made them too opaque for Bingham to clear—unlike Machu Picchu, where the marks of post-Columbian history weren't too visible.

Chapter four traces some of the efforts of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA—although it can be found under different names also, like CIAA or OCIAA, Olson follows the acronym used by the National Archives). The OIAA was a governmental agency created during World War II that took U.S. relations with Latin America as a matter of national security (146) and was "primarily concerned with the rhetorical coordination of Latin American acceptance of U.S. primacy" (147). Olson focuses on three "fronts": education, exchange, and entertainment, through which the OIAA wanted to make Latin America "look *to* the United States as not only a good neighbor, but an ideal one—a nation to follow, admire, and emulate" (147), as well as how the Latin American public received OIAA's efforts with skepticism: they didn't see what they were meant to see.

"Education" is analyzed through a series of educational films made by Walt Disney to promote literacy, hygiene, and health as intertwined, "making bodily health and literate capacity nearly indistinguishable" (159). Here, Olson argues that such capacities "were presented as essential for modern life, and they modeled an American life patterned after the United States" (159) to help create a better Latin American working-class body. But the films were criticized and never made it past the test phase: first by the advisory team of Mexican educators, who proposed a different pedagogical approach (157), and then by the Ecuadorian press, which even suggested that the U.S. could learn a lot from *their* national literacy campaigns (164-165).

"Exchange" is read through a diverse set of objects and events that made part of the OIAA's exchange programs, aimed at creating "hemispheric unity" (165) through the circulation of "individuals, groups, objects, and ideas" (165). The most important aspect of these exchanges was that Latin American countries, like Peru and Mexico, were more interested in how they would benefit from the exchanges rather than validating U.S. hemispheric intentions (168-170). Even if those are "small signs" (171),

Olson argues, they demonstrate that "Latin Americans recognized U.S. purpose and even sometimes accepted it, but also consistently pushed it off-center and out of focus" (171).

Lastly, "entertainment" is read through two Walt Disney films (and a comic book that would accompany them). The films were at the center of the OIAA's efforts because they were able to reach wide audiences through "full body engagement" as a tool to create "hemispheric cooperation" and "solidarity" (172). As Olson argues, "being aware of oneself as part of a larger American audience that was also watching, listening, and laughing would not just produce hemispheric solidarity, it was hemispheric solidarity enacted" (173). The film stories too were proof of hemispheric solidarity because they narrated the friendship between characters from the U.S. (Donald Duck), Mexico (Panchito Pistolas), and Brazil (José Carioca), but always presented the U.S. as the center of those relationships. Here, Olson even argues that the films share a "pioneer nostalgia" that "invoked a frontier myth shared across the American republics but treated it very much in U.S. terms" (175). The latter would be "the masculine myths of the ever-expanding frontier and the erudite, energetic explorer encountering "natives" (175), but it is not clear why they are "U.S. terms." The analysis of the films is too short to expand on those ideas.

Olson places this chapter at the end of the book not only because it deals with more recent developments. The earlier chapters focused on asserting that magnitude within the U.S., but with OIAA it was taken outside because it needed "hemispheric" validity, although, as we have seen, that validation was never fully achieved. Moreover, according to Olsen, the fact that educational films made to promote literacy and hygiene had English versions blurred the boundary between the "outside" and the "inside." They were also intended for the U.S. American public, meaning that "the Americanness of impoverished Brown, Black, and Spanish-speaking audiences in the United States was as partial and decentered as was that of any Latin American" (179).

Olson's conclusions are unusual for a scholarly monograph like *American Magnitude*. After a couple of pages in which the author situates the contemporary relevance of the book in understanding, for example, Trump's obsession with "Make America Great Again," and the evident racism, xenophobia, and imperialism that lie beneath the usual claims for greatness, the fifth chapter argues that "magnitude" permeates many aspects of the contemporary "Western" life (the scholarly practice being particularly embedded in it). Thus, the book ends with some recommendations,

or "practices," for a post-magnitude rhetoric, which wouldn't be a rhetoric of the total opposite—the infinitely small—but a rhetoric of the limited.

The first practice is to be partial and move away from dramatic binarisms (189). This, Olson says, would only be achieved by understanding that the poles are illusory and that we can work in small steps, without ever wanting to arrive at a final and total solution to our problems. The second practice is to "keep a messy slate" (190). In order to do that, we must first acknowledge that magnitude needs "clean slates" to prove its worthiness. And then confront it with the idea that everything is made of living past, which makes "clean slates" a chimera. The third practice begins by seeing that the magnitude needs an invulnerable individual, who understands the communitarian as "feminized relations and decreased effort" (192). Thus, we should "do the hard work of connection," that is, advocate for building relationships, responsibility, and accountability beyond the individual. And finally, the fourth practice is "care" (193), as opposed to appropriation, competitiveness, and hoarding. But "care" is not necessarily what "white fragility" has asked for, i.e., not to be hurt. It is "fierce, risky, and demanding of commitment" (193).

This last practice of care is a good excuse to end this review by discussing one specific aspect of *American Magnitude:* the use of "whiteness" as an analytical tool. Throughout the book, *megethos* is tied to White, male settler-colonialism, imperialism, racism, and xenophobia. It is clear how the discourse, practice, and feeling of "magnitude" were used in the creation of such a particular image of "America." Nonetheless, it seems that the category "white" preexisted, and that "white people" (as a discrete entity) used "magnitude" to advance their imperialistic agenda in different moments through history (being those "white" apparently the same, always).

In discussing Church's paintings, for example, Olson states that one of the goals of the second chapter is to "to defamiliarize the presumption of whiteness and [U.S.] Americanness that suffuses Church's paintings and the stories of magnitude told about and through them" (70). I am not going to argue that such defamiliarization does not occur it does when we understand that Church's paintings claim a "universal" right to see, understand, and own the Andes. And that they do so for a specific human group (White, male, and Christian settler-colonialists), and erase the counter-stories that made those paintings even possible. However, a more complete defamiliarization could be achieved by exploring how those "universal" claims constructed a specific and historically situated sense (a feeling, too?) of whiteness. It would be worth exploring whether American magnitude co-created the very notion(s) of "whiteness."

One might ask, for example: What would be different in Olson's very detailed and in-depth analysis if "whiteness" were taken as a reality under permanent construction? What would change if the analysis had considered that the supposed material existence of whiteness and its "transparency" (I follow here the critical race theorist Ian Haney López) can be understood as one of the bases of racism? And therefore, how might "whiteness" have changed throughout the century covered by the book (1845-1945), as a consequence of magnitude? That is, not only how "magnitude" fed from whiteness, but also how those claims for magnitude constructed whiteness. I said that Olson's proposed fourth practice was an excuse to discuss this because, in describing it, the author identifies herself as a "white settler woman" (193) and speaks of "my people" without question. Discussing the possibility of identifying as "white" without inherently perpetuating the existence of discrete races—at least discursively, and therefore analytically—is not within the scope of this review. Nevertheless, I cannot help but see a close relationship between that easy (and by way of *mea culpa*, perhaps?) identification with "whiteness," and the treatment of the latter as a transhistorical reality that needs no deconstruction because it only means one identifiable, material thing: ...wait, what was it?