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Review/Reseña

Juan Pablo Dabove. *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Bandits and Literature in Latin America 1816-1929*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

Bringing Violence Back to the Forefront

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In 1991, Doris Sommer published her pathbreaking *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*. One of the most often cited books in scholarship that deals with nineteenth-century Latin American literature, Sommer's work looks at the national novels of Latin America and finds the nature of their appeal to be centered in an "erotics of politics." She shows how a variety of novel national ideas are all ostensibly grounded in "natural" heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts at mid-century. Her nuanced reading of over a dozen romances opened our understanding to how national identities were imagined into existence in Latin America.

Juan Pablo Dabove's *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Bandits and Literature in Latin America 1816-1929* both challenges and complements Sommer's well known study, which he criticizes for the lack of theoretical attention paid to violence as an equally important signifier as romance (36). Dabove looks at the role the bandit plays in narrative fiction in what he calls the long Latin American nineteenth century. He focuses on elite production, from José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El periquillo sarniento* to Rómulo Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* and not on popular cultural expressions such as the Mexican *corrido* or the Argentine *folletín criollista*. Whereas Sommer is concerned with the relationship of marriage and desire in nation building, Dabove examines the ways in which banditry and rural insurgents have been depicted and how their representation has been crucial to the formation of national identities.

There is an impressive breadth to this well-written and original study. The author balances a multitude of historical, literary, and theoretical sources and draws upon them in an adroit and not overbearing manner. Dabove's arguments are erudite and strongly supported and the result is a text that is relevant well beyond literary criticism. Social historians and cultural critics will be particularly attracted to this timely work, as one of the constant threads throughout the text is the interaction between elite and subaltern culture. One of the author's starting points is Angel Rama's concept of the elite *letrado* and the power of writing and centrality of cities in the historical formation of Latin American societies. Then, Dabove contends that "the rural rebel labeled a bandit by the state was among the foremost cultural Others of Latin American modernity" (3). Using Derridean deconstructionism (without the opaque language games), the author identifies the way the *letrado* maps out the social terrain where the defining feature is the opposition between lawful and outlaw violence, and how this very opposition is barred and erased and *letrado* thinking is brought to its own limits. In so doing, this in-depth examination of the bandit trope exposes the contradictions, ambiguities, and ironies that characterize Latin American modernity.

Nightmares of the Lettered City identifies three major representational strategies in which *letrado* elites depicted rural insurgency

as banditry, all three of which the author shows to be riddled with internal contradictions. The book is organized in three parts that each study five or six different texts, and, although these are focused on Argentina, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela, it is fair to say that the book presents a portrayal of banditry in Latin America as a whole since the tradition of bandit literature in these four countries had a prominent place in the national literary canon and in the national imagination to a greater degree than in other countries. In Part I the bandit is seen as a radical Other whose destruction is paramount in order for the *letrado's* vision of a national project to advance forward in a meaningful way. Part II addresses the bandit as an instrument of critique, or a mediation through which the *letrado* engages in an "intra-elite polemics with alternate political positions" (285). The last section of *Nightmares* is subtitled "The Bandit as Devious Brother and as Suppressed Origin." Here the bandit is incorporated into the origins of the nation state at the origin of its violence, which needed to be suppressed as a force yet exalted as historical memory to achieve cultural coherence.

Dabove is adept at reading silences and focuses on a brief bandit scene in *El periquillo sarniento* (1816) to initiate his study. He reads this scene as an effort by the narrator to pass judgment on the insurgency as an alternative to the colonial order. The bandit society is an alternative society without a lettered city at its center, a society without a center, and hence an impossible alternative (51).

The next two chapters address narratives by Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Facundo* (1845) and *El Chacho* (1867). In the first, Sarmiento sees the state as the written word, leading to civilization. Rosas, Quiroga and Artigas belong to an oral, barbarous culture that Sarmiento, Echeverría and company deny as legitimate and whose actions they nullify. Dabove sees *El Chacho* as a continuation of *Facundo*, as well as being an effort at legitimizing the author's position as state maker. As in Fernández Lizardi's novel, characterizing *El Chacho* as a mere highway bandit deprives the peasant insurgency of its political status. The text works as a "negative exemplum" (79), a cautionary tale of popular sovereignty. A related cautionary message is present in Franklin Távora's *O Cabelleira* (1876). Here a cruel and irredeemable bandit becomes a humble, law-abiding

peasant who is eventually hanged. The monster turns into a moral hero and martyr to the local crowd who assume a collective identity, positioning themselves against the colonial state. A new political body, composed of landowners and “the people” replace the colonial state, so the body of the bandit is crucial as a point of articulation around which the legitimacy of rule is to be fought. The author shows that success of a new metropolitan order shall only be attained through respect of the peasantry and their rejection of banditry. Ignacio Manuel Altamirano’s *El Zarco* (1901) also promotes a new order by defining behavior capable of restoring social cohesion and a system of authority that had collapsed. Here, however, the task to eliminate bandits is not in the hands of the *letrado* but in those of civil society itself. “The death of El Zarco before a firing squad [. . .] provides the possibility of “burying” (literally and metaphorically) a past of ambiguous compromises as a condition for a future without divergences” (107). Dabove wraps up the first part of his book with an interesting chapter on criminology, where he uses his literary critic’s tools to read scientific criminology texts written at the end of the nineteenth century and flush out the political and cultural influences that went into their writing. In all six of the chapters of Part I, banditry is addressed as the demon or “monster” of national, modernizing projects and Dabove emphasizes how the suppression of the bandit is the most essential moment in the narrative.

In the second section of *Nightmares*, all of the texts studied by Dabove use banditry as a cultural artifact in a critique of the political-cultural dimensions at play in the nineteenth century. By looking at the bandit trope, the author shows the vagueness of the lines separating bandit and *letrado* projects and reveals internecine and cultural wars within the elite. As a result we see differing views on the topic of rural violence and its relationship to the formation of the state. There are separate chapters on Luis Inclán’s *Astucia* (1865), Eduardo Blanco’s *Zárate* (1882), José Hernández’s *Martín Fierro* (1872 and 1879), Eduardo Gutiérrez’s *Juan Moreira* (1879), Alberto Ghirardo’s *Alma gaucha* (1906), and Manuel Payno’s *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (1891). Dabove shows how in each of these texts banditry is mobilized by a *letrado* agenda, but not as the demon of the national, modernizing project as seen in Part I, rather as a

negotiation where the *letrado* offers alternative political positions to contemporary debates.

Let us look at one of Dabove's examples: *Los bandidos de Río Frío*. Dabove reads the novel as a genealogy of Mexican modernity and a means of engaging in a radical critique of Porfirian presuppositions that consolidated the Mexican state. Payno's novel criticizes the state that prides itself on containing banditry and promoting Europeanness, when in reality the criminalization of the state was occurring from above. The state does not face its others, rather it becomes its other. "Capitalism is denuded of its illusion of a mutually beneficial and voluntary exchange of commodities and presents itself as a mechanism oriented by violence to the forceful dispossession of the other" (202). Payno's bandit gang serves as an allegory of the *Porfirista* present, which does not arise as "order and progress" but as another form of chaos and violence: savage peripheral capitalism.

In Part III, Dabove looks at Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões* (1902), Leopoldo Lugones's *La guerra gaucha* (1905), Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1915-16), Laureano Valenilla Lanz's *Cesarismo democrático* (1919), and Gallegos's *Doña Bárbara* (1929). The author shows that in these works violence is exalted as the origin of the nation, but only as a memory and a legitimizing symbol. The paradox of nationhood lies in the transition from outlaw violence to state violence and thus the past insists upon the present, and banditry continues to haunt the *letrado* imagination (218). In *Os sertões*, the army must abandon its European ("civilized") ways and fight like the jagunços in order to defeat them; "the nation subdues the sertão when the entire nation becomes the sertão and outlaw violence reigns sovereign" (228). Lugones revises the place of gaucho violence by focusing on the wars of independence in *La guerra gaucha* and on the Indian wars in *El payador*, exalting this violence as patriotic and epic. In *Los de abajo* banditry is the metaphor for legitimate political violence and Azuela reminds his readers of the long list of tragedies that form Mexican history—endless conflicts of Mexicans against Mexicans. Valenilla Lanz defends the authoritarian rule of Juan Vicente Gómez and highlights Venezuelan democracy as collusion between bandit and sovereign. And finally, in one of

his best chapters, Dabove reads *Doña Bárbara* as a critical reflection on violence and the relationship between violence and the agrarian order. He concludes that in Gallegos's novel allegory is untenable: "barbarism is the soul of the rule of law" (283), not something lost in the past since it is the basis of present relationships. Part III of *Nightmares* demonstrates how banditry continues to haunt the *letrado* imagination as a force that imposes itself and continually defines the present.

Nightmares of the Lettered City is a comprehensive piece of scholarship that is destined to become the standard work on the role of banditry in the imagination of Latin American thought. This is a book that I will return to time and again both for its studious analysis of the bandit trope and its sophisticated individual readings. There are several aspects that make this a particularly appealing text. Dabove's closing chapter is titled "Conclusions" in the plural. Not only does he summarize some of the main topics covered, but also entertains numerous related categories that are of interest for further analysis. Whether these are pointing us in the direction of Dabove's next project or simply meant to stimulate the reader's mind and offer fertile ground for research is unclear, but the tone throughout *Nightmares of the Lettered City* suggests the latter. Sprinkled throughout his engaging work, Dabove makes thought-provoking connections with twentieth-century texts and related themes of interest. The author's passion for his topic shines through and these clever connections will certainly spur related studies by engaged readers. Another admirable quality of Dabove's work is the impressive fresh readings of some of the foundational works of Latin American literary criticism. I have already noted his mention of Doris Sommer; he reads Josefina Ludmer in the chapters on *Martín Fierro* and *Juan Moreira*; he tackles Roberto González Echevarría and Carlos Alonso in the chapter on *Doña Bárbara*, and so on.

I have only three minor criticisms of this book. At times I felt the author cited Paul Vanderwood's excellent work on banditry more than necessary. *Nightmares* is an extremely well researched book and Dabove has abundant original ideas to contribute, without needing to rely heavily on any one specific work. My other two criticisms are directed more at the

University of Pittsburgh Press. As a reader I was frustrated by the separation of primary and secondary sources in the references, which seemed unnecessary and even confusing. Of greater concern is the incomplete nature of the index; many items are missing, for instance, numerous references to Borges. But none of these criticisms take away from the important contribution Juan Pablo Dabove has made to our understanding of the role of banditry and, perhaps even more significantly, the ways in which it was depicted by *letrado* elites and their resulting failures to cancel banditry as a refractory core of Latin American reality. Dabove's book will open up our understanding of many of the underlying functions of violence and insurgency in Latin America and will prove to be essential reading for literary critics and historians of the "long" Latin American nineteenth century.