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Review / Reseña

Regina Root. *Couture & Consensus: Fashion and Politics in Postcolonial Argentina*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Stitching the Material, Weaving the Voice

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In *Couture & Consensus*, Regina A. Root studies the Argentine public sphere in the nineteenth century, a time of strictly coded discourse in both the verbal and visual spheres. In much of this period, what we later have come to call national consolidation seemed all but impossible, and something as trivial as a color choice placed a garment-wearer firmly in one political camp or the other. Root's fundamental questions in this volume focus on identity and its expression through the material culture and discourses associated with fashion. In her study, the quotidian objects of the Rosas era take on a vitality and meaning that help us to understand the ideologies that saturated these artifacts. In Root's own words, "*Couture & Consensus* argues that dress served as a critical expression of political agency and citizenship during the struggle to forge the Argentine nation"

(xxiii). A great strength of the monograph is its firm anchoring of Argentina's modern beginnings in the present moment, such that any visitor to the country today will be able to see—in the clothing and advertisements around her—that the issues Root elucidates continue to structure public discourse in Argentina in the twenty-first century. The result is a rich, detailed, and enjoyable study of the Rosas period that gives contemporary readers an interpretive tool and a model that is both solidly grounded and varied in its approach.

In many ways, *Couture & Consensus* is the work of a skilled historian of material culture. The volume shows careful and extensive research in a wide variety of archives and museums, and it beautifully reconstructs the material remnants of nineteenth-century Argentina, providing its reader with a vivid sense of the objects, colors, and textures that bore such strong symbolic value under *rosismo*. The author's fine sensitivity to voice, however, marks the volume as a product of many years of literary study, and in her approach the sartorial is a starting point for a broader analysis of social relations, power structures, and the saturation of everyday life with political discourse in the Rosas period. For example, Root devotes several pages to the issue of race in this period, not simply discussing African Argentines' vestments, but explaining the complex and historically contingent relationships between that group and other social players, be they other marginalized groups, as in the case of women, or figures representing official *rosista* discourse, as we see in the case of Manuela Rosas, the dictator's daughter and a patron of African Argentines. What emerges is a proposal on civic participation by marginalized groups—especially women and blacks—within a context of political polarization.

Root studies an astonishing variety of sources, and she is correct to remind her readers that, "[t]o construct a more comprehensive history of postcolonial material culture in Argentina, scholars must rely on the printed word to reconstruct more fully the history of dress, culture, and identity" (xxii). Among her textual sources, such canonical works as Mármol's *Amalia* and Echeverría's *La cautiva* coexist with almost unknown archival materials, including letters, political song and official *rosista* verse, all of which are treated with the careful consideration for

voice that is one of this author's special talents. Nineteenth-century periodicals are an important source of information as well, from satirical political rags (like *El Gaucho* and *La Gaucha*) to women's magazines (such as *El Álbum de Señoritas* and *Búcaro Americano*) and venues like *La Moda*, which adopted the language of fashion to skirt official censorship of political opposition. Of course, Root's sources are also sartorial, ranging from political insignias to period portraits to antique clothing that has been conserved longer than a century; in some cases, a well-known piece of material culture like the *peinetón* receives new and valuable critical treatment that integrates the object into a broader theoretical framework.

Root organizes *Couture & Consensus* into an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion, which is followed by extensive and detailed notes and index. The first chapter, "Uniform Consensus," explores the theatricality of political discussions in the years after Argentina's independence, in particular focusing on the uniform required of civilians during the Rosas dictatorship. The regime's politicization of the minutiae of daily life codified gender roles into stereotypes of male aggression and female passivity. Rather than simply overshadow the contributions of women, however, the *rosista* regime appropriated female voice in order to rally support for its agenda. "Dressed to Kill," chapter two, follows closely on this discussion of gendered representations of citizenship by focusing on women's participation in the war of independence, for example as seamstresses of flags and uniforms. Root argues that, because Rosas's political apparatus relied on a "cult of male leadership, [...] any notion of female agency was thereby subservient to male power and subject to manipulation" (xxvi). Despite the increased civic visibility of women under *rosismo*, the author shows that they were represented "as beautiful 'possessions' dominated by male authorities. Any potential for female political agency was quickly contested by the practices of sexual and sometimes racial exclusion" (xxvi).

The *peinetón*, a large and heavy hair comb that distinguished Argentine women in the 1820's and 30's, is the topic of the third chapter, "Fashion as Presence." Root examines this distinctive ornament as "a metonym for the politically engaged woman" (xxvii), explaining that the

combs were a socially-acceptable way for women to present their own nationalism and political views, even incorporating carved portraits of Rosas himself. As political tensions increased, the combs grew in size to three feet square, and these exaggerated proportions became the target of satires that critiqued women's occupation of public space. "Fashion Writing," the book's fourth chapter, turns to the varied uses of that genre for political ends. By adopting a sartorial veil, some oppositional writers were able, at least momentarily, to escape censorship and circulate their forbidden political ideals. In Alberdi's *La Moda*, for example, European fashion figured prominently as a representation of Republican ideals; "the adoption of foreign styles, however, was only a path to enlightenment and not an end in itself" (107). In the case of *La Camelia*, anonymous but probably female editors took advantage of fashion's political overtones, writing in a field that was more accepted for women than overt politics and yet allowed them an opportunity for civic engagement and critique, especially as regards the need to restructure gender roles in society. The book's fifth and final chapter, "Searching for Female Emancipation," explores women writers' treatment of fashion as a liberating force during national reorganization. Here an extensive discussion of fashion and self-transformation, including the work of Juana Manuela Gorriti and María del Pilar Sinués de Marco, traces the discourses of emancipation and fantasy that recur in post-Caseros Argentina.

It is perhaps ironic that this lovely project is somewhat constrained by its own material genre, that of the printed academic book. Despite Root's obvious skill and fine ear with both languages, at times English translations are simply incapable of transmitting the conceptual or phonic play of the Spanish original. At these moments the reader may wish that the Spanish original had been somehow included. Similarly, the author demonstrates that verbal description can in fact provide her readers with a surprisingly vivid understanding of the visual and tactile objects she studies, but her very skill sharpens a reader's curiosity for a fuller material experience of the archive. For this reason, a CD- or web-based catalog of sources, with color photographs when permitted by copyright, would have been welcome. Nonetheless, as should be apparent to readers of this review,

the book's merits are significant, compelling, and vastly outnumber the limitations imposed on it by publishing conventions. *Couture & Consensus* is a well-researched, engaging, and insightful guide to fashion and its complex meanings in nineteenth-century Argentina. Scholars of Latin American history, literature, and culture—particularly those with an interest in questions of gender, class, or material culture—will find the book to be a major contribution to the growing field of fashion studies in Latin America.