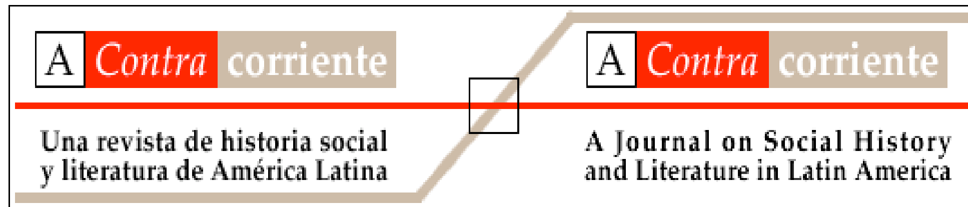

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Review/Reseña

Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, *The Conquest of History: Spanish Colonialism and National Histories in the Nineteenth Century*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

Spanish Colonialism and the Production of Knowledge

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Beginning with the premise that colonialism and the production of knowledge are intimately related, Christopher Schmidt-Nowara's interests in this book lie in the versions of national and imperial histories elaborated by nineteenth-century Spanish and Antillean intellectuals. The production of knowledge and memory is a rich field that has recently begun to receive attention from historians of Iberian empires and Latin American and Caribbean nations. This welcome addition to that field aspires to be truly Atlantic in its perspective, not only by paying attention to history-writing on both sides of the ocean, but also by demonstrating the ways in which Spanish and Antillean intellectuals constituted a real field of dialogue and

inquiry. Ambitiously, Schmidt-Nowara also includes the Philippines in his purview, underscoring the expansive nature of Spanish imperialism.

Writing against arguments about the rise of *Hispanismo* out of the ashes of the crumbling empire, he locates celebrations of Spanish imperialism that were articulated much earlier as part of ongoing efforts to unify a fractured Spain. In the eighteenth century, for example, historians such as Juan Bautista Muñoz defended Spain against accusations of imperial incompetence by collecting manuscripts and creating archives devoted to colonial chronicles. By the time decolonization did come around, Spanish historians and intellectuals had a rich archive from which to draw. They mined those manuscripts for versions of Spanish colonialism that refuted the many iterations of the Black Legend, including its most recent incarnation as Adam Smith's celebration of British colonialism. In this context, Spanish historians such as Antonio María Fabié wrote histories of Spanish colonialism that emphasized what Schmidt-Nowara calls Spain's "civilizing mission," with arguments about the salutary effects of miscegenation and the spread of Catholicism. Sounding uncannily like José Vasconcelos who was to write similarly about the cosmic race, Fabié apparently used a speech at the Congreso Internacional de Americanistas in 1881 to sing the praises of the "superior race" that was created out of "fusions" between Spaniards and indigenous people (40).

The problem was that Antillean intellectuals did not often agree with Spanish interpretations of the past, and reworked them to their own ends. The memory of Christopher Columbus serves as a perfect example. Not only was his commemoration a point of contention for the Spanish, who in the end managed to produce a national hero out of an Italian born explorer, but intellectuals in the colonies in turn rejected the heroic version of Columbus and replaced him with versions of their own. For them, the Columbus to be remembered was either the one imprisoned and mistreated by an ungrateful Spain, or the unthinkingly cruel destroyer of a utopian, pre-Colombian past.

Ultimately European heroes held limited potential for Antillean nationalists, who were interested in generating historical narratives using as much autochthonous material as possible. For this, they looked to the

indigenous past—hazy as it was, since most of the indigenous inhabitants of the islands were decimated within decades of the European arrival—for the stuff from which to cobble together alternative versions of the colonial period. So they used archaeology to find concrete evidence of pre-Columbian civilizations, and pored over the chronicles to find indigenous martyrs like Caonabo and Camagüey.

But as Schmidt-Nowara points out, these efforts to rewrite histories contained their own silences, particularly in relation to slavery and peoples of African descent, a thorny question for Antillean patriots looking to distinguish themselves from the most objectionable Spanish practices. The results were convoluted interpretations and reinterpretations of canonical figures which worked very hard to create discursive spaces in which critiques of Spanish colonialism and justifications of slavery and empire could coexist. The Cuban intellectual José Antonio Saco's interpretation of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Dominican friar who in the sixteenth century wrote a scathing indictment of Spanish treatment of its indigenous slaves, works in precisely this way, to simultaneously defy and legitimize Spanish imperialism. In the end, although this is beyond the scope of Schmidt-Nowara's study, this would become an ongoing battle, made more interesting by the participation of former slaves and their descendants in these conversations as the twentieth century progressed.

This volume should open new avenues of exploration. Particularly interesting are the allusions to the material aspects of the production of knowledge, such as book collecting, the creation of archives, and the struggles over ownership and publication of certain manuscripts. The dimensions of this story grounded in circulating manuscripts and their copies may prove fascinating and fruitful venues of inquiry. More importantly, it will undoubtedly alert readers to the high stakes involved in the practice of commemoration. As demonstrated by the recent spate of occasions remembering the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) or the British abolition of the slave trade (1807), anniversaries of all sorts seem to prompt more and more commemorations. These are always fraught occasions as competing versions of the past vie for primacy. *The Conquest of History*

reminds us that history does indeed need to be conquered time and time again.