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### **Review/Reseña**

William Acree, *Everyday Reading: Print Culture and Collective Identity in The Río de la Plata, 1780-1910*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011.

## **The Cultural Politics of Reading in Nineteenth-Century Latin America**

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What does it mean to explore the history of reading? Scholars are well used to the study of writing, but reading is more elusive and harder to define. If writing expresses some form of measurable intent, reading is an effect that generally goes unmemorialized and unpreserved, especially reading as a private or intimate experience, the dominant form of reading since the second half of the nineteenth century. Elite reading practices have been preserved to some degree, thanks to literary salons that were

documented in newspapers, and scenes of reading in novels like *María* by Jorge Isaacs. Not only does Efraín read *Atala* to María and his sister, but also when his friend Carlos comes to visit, he offers to read to him to pass the time, as they used to do in Bogotá when they were school chums. Reading practices among commoners have received less attention and are more enigmatic. One compelling question is to what degree, and through which concrete strategies, did nation-building elites try to reach readers who did not belong to the literary and cultural establishment?

Enter William Acree, whose *Everyday Reading: Print Culture and Collective Identity in the Río de la Plata, 1780-1910*, provides a model for how reading can be foregrounded in conversations about state formation, nationalism, gender and modernization. Inspired by the ideas of “everyday” resistance (James C. Scott) and “everyday” state formation (Joseph and Nugent), Acree coins the phrase “everyday reading” to designate the texts, circuits and practices associated with reading among broad populations. (It should be remembered that the literacy rate in the nineteenth-century River Plate area was uncommonly high by Latin American standards.) Acree writes that everyday reading, like elite reading, promoted sociability and “solidified beliefs and forms of behavior” (4). It is not a synonym of popular literature, although it contains it as one of its elements; everyday reading is rather a set of practices, locations and instruments. We might call it a signifying space containing actors (authors), a stage (*pulperías*, country stores, the home), scripts (print matter, including popular literature) and effects, intended and otherwise (obedience or contestation).

Acree’s insights show that to understand everyday reading we need to dispense, to a great degree, with the study of literature with a capital ‘L’. While it is undoubtedly true that the reception of landmark works of the canon gives us valuable insights, the field of Literary and Cultural Studies has generally rejected the broader study of print culture, dismissing it as background or context. Instead, Acree approaches his object by defining writing in a broader, more inclusive way. For his purposes, the production of meaning through print is not the exclusive domain of novels and explicit political pronouncements (although these undoubtedly matter), but also of

stamps, money, cigarette wrappers and even notebooks. This array of materials, some ideological and public, others quotidian and disposable, allow us to see print as something that permeates individual and collective life, shaping relationships and mindscapes. Print culture, writes Acree, is about “the relations between the practices of reading and writing, on the one hand, and social behaviors, individual and collective values, economic transactions, political decisions, state institutions, and ideologies on the other” (3).

*Everyday Reading* is helpfully structured around key moments in the development of print culture and everyday reading in the River Plate between 1780 and 1910. The book begins with the Wars of Independence, and the deployment of print to promote new political subjectivities. Not only did lettered elites use reading to inculcate patriotic values among the population by teaching them to read, and reading out loud to them, but also by creating libraries that would serve as beacons of modernization. Indeed, letters and the attendant readings they invited provoked deep anxieties among viceregal and patriotic leaders, who sought to curtail access to letters through censorship and the outright destruction of print matter. One of Acree’s most useful arguments here relates to the concept of “symbolic repertoires,” which are sets of symbols and print ephemera (coats of arms, song lyrics, poetry anthologies) that were used to represent political allegiance and instill patriotic sentiment. This move enables Acree to value form and purpose over theme, as well as providing a useful catch-all for what might otherwise seem like a random constellation of print matter.

Next comes the rise of cattle culture between 1829 and 1870, a period in which cattle, politics and writing became intertwined. Acree charts the period by looking at three stages of the influence of Juan Manuel de Rosas: 1829-1835, when Rosas was ascendant; 1835-1852, when Rosas was embattled; 1852-1870, when Rosas was in decline and the liberalism ascendant. In the first stage, print culture blended with cattle culture, producing cattle brand catalogues, *papeletas* or gaucho passports, and other repertoires that equated words with the cattle economy. In the second stage, the word and its readers went to war; print culture became an intense contest between Federalists and Unitarians. This militarization

found expression in the use of *lemas* on *divisas* (inscribed strips of cloth on clothes) and an explosion of combative partisan newspapers. By 1870, the idea of a post-partisan, nationalist literature had begun to emerge, appropriating politicized icons like the gaucho and casting them in roles that were either harmless (*Fausto* by Del Campo) or social in character (*Martín Fierro* by Hernández). Social literature mapped identities, ascribing significance and meaning, and locating problems to be solved, but it did not advocate war like print culture had at mid-century.

The book then examines the establishment of public schools and its attendant instruments (textbooks and mass produced notebooks), as well as nationalist literature designed to foment patriotic feeling in the home. Here Acree foregrounds José Pedro Varela and Juan Domingo Sarmiento's efforts on behalf of the construction of a public educational system in Uruguay and Argentina. The relationship between education history and everyday reading cannot be minimized because schooling is a mechanism for making reading compulsory on a sustained, daily basis. Particularly compelling is how Acree explores the production of notebooks with illustrated covers and embedded patriotic lessons and writing exercises. He examines student compositions from the end of the century and a surviving notebook from 1898, which contains the writings of a girl called Raudelina Pereda from Tacuarembó. One of her teachers wrote in the margin: "Make sure you use commas and don't doodle!" (120). In this section of the book, Acree privileges the experience of girls and women, examining manuals and lesson books on motherhood and femininity.

The book's epilogue, "Spreading Word and Image", tackles the topic of the mass production of print matter in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century River Plate. This print matter included collectible cigarette cards inscribed with episodes of national history or the gauchesque, decorative tram tickets, illustrated national currencies, postage stamps, postcards, matchboxes and a boom in illustrated magazines. Acree argues that this kind of print, both lettered and symbolic, essentially papered daily life, and made everyday reading automatic, unconscious and natural. In other words, the very substance of everyday life was now enmeshed in words, papers and pictures. Print authorized

capitalist exchange (money), facilitated communication (postage stamps) and became intertwined with smoking (collectible cards.) Here we move beyond the print runs of works like *Juan Moreira* or *Martín Fierro* into something fundamentally more profound and all-encompassing, which we might call a branding of day-to-day life with print.

As is evident by this overview, *Everyday Reading* is about the insistent push to inscribe politics and society with printed papers, whether printed with words, symbols or images. Early on, Acree vividly conveys the power of print with an anecdote about how the letter blocks of an old print shop were melted down to mold bullets to be used to fight the gaucho caudillo Felipe Varela in the 1860s (17). Clearly, reading and writing are not activities that happen on the margins of society, among a tiny elite, but rather at the center of politics, war and daily life.

*Everyday Reading* will be invaluable to scholars of the River Plate but also to a broader audience of students and scholars interested in posing questions about everyday reading in other parts of Latin America. Acree insists on historicism, the precise examination of material culture and the broad scope of print culture. The resulting synthesis is an admirable achievement that will provide frames and inspirations for scholars and students who want to dig deeper into nineteenth-century culture. *Everyday Reading* is written in an accessible style and is profusely illustrated with fascinating images of divisas, schools, notebooks, and other forms of print.