Reviews

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William G. Acree Jr. and Juan Carlos González Espitia (eds.), *Building Nineteenth-Century Latin America: Re-Rooted Cultures, Identities, and Nations* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009), pp. viii + 285, $79.95, $34.95 pb; £70.95, £31.50 pb.

This volume of essays on the culture of Latin America in the nineteenth century, born out of collaborative work presented at Duke, is an interesting collection with some good pieces. It includes a short introduction by the editors, followed by 11 chapters: Hugo Achugar on the 'foundational images' (stamps, coins, paintings, etc.) of nineteenth-century Latin America; Acree on the emergence of print culture in the River Plate around the time of independence; Amy E. Wright on the beginnings of serial fiction in Mexico and the role of the novel in the construction of national models; Michael Kenneth Huner on print culture and its cultivation of orality, and sham republicanism in Paraguay during the War of the Triple Alliance; Beatriz González-Stephan on 'historic imagination' in Venezuela; John Charles Chasteen on carnivals and transgression in the region's cities; Stuart A. Day on Federico Gamboa's negotiation of power in his political and theatrical work during the Porfiriato; Terry Rugeley on the Church, religion and piety in the Yucatán during and just after Díaz's rule; Christopher Conway on the *pollo*, forerunner of the modern Mexican homosexual; Patricia Lapolla Swier on the gendered language of José Martí's play, *Amistad funesta*, and early writings; and González Espitia on syphilis as a (besmirched) window onto the tensions at the heart of nation formation.

The essays include some fascinating details: the Buenos Aires printing press that was used to churn out patriot propaganda was brought out of retirement by an officer of the Spanish Crown, its lead type-blocks eventually melted down into bullets to be fired at gauchos in the late 1860s (Acree); the water fight at the heart of carnival was in fact a battle of the sexes (Chasteen); creoles repeatedly used an indigenous *india* figure on coins to represent independence (Achugar). Some of the essays flit a little (Achugar is guilty of this, one minute commenting on a painting, the next on stamps), and it is often these same essays that go in for the grand statements about how a certain cultural form was foundational for the national imaginary – Blanes' painting *El juramento de los Treinta y Tres Orientales* in the case of Uruguay, for example. The implicit proposition here, and throughout the book, has become a mainstay of contemporary cultural criticism, namely that culture – not just economics, politics and war – is an important form of power that can literally build a nation.

In the abstract the idea stands to reason and can, if well argued, be compelling. When not handled carefully, however, it can suffer from two defects. Firstly, it becomes unnuanced and self-fulfilling: the foundational images glorified independence, ergo they helped construct the national image. No misfire and no misrecognition here. Secondly, it overstates the case for culture, presenting stamps, for example, as a tumultuous force before which empires fall.

González-Stephan's contribution is interesting in that it manages to be both compelling and unnuanced. The piece focuses, with plenty of digressions, on the first Venezuelan National Fair of 1883, where the main exhibition hall was a Gothic palace. It is full of interesting comment on the use of this tropical Gothic as an attempt to lend the nation distant, civilised origins and camouflage its Hispanic past – to sculpt a whiter, more virile, more military, more Christian aesthetic. The chapter's consummate use of a certain contemporary critical idiom seduces and irritates in equal measure, however: we must take on trust the 'new techniques of seeing', since we are not told what the old ones are. The lack of nuance can be heard in telltale expressions such as the 'logics [sic] of the cultural matrix' (p. 122), an extension of Foucault's one-sided, paranoid vision of power-knowledge from *Discipline and Punish*, with its corresponding simplifications. In González-Stephan's words, 'Travelers and artists thus worked quickly to amend [sic] an esthetic of emptiness while philosophers were occupied with fine-tuning the universal categories of metaphysics' (p. 109). A pithy statement, but is that it on nineteenth-century art and philosophy? The problem with the argument that culture is not merely epiphenomenal is not that culture is brought into too close contact with larger forces (that is what cultural studies does best), but that it ends up being 'read off' as an undifferentiated part of the historical tableau.

While González-Stephan focuses on the disciplinary apparatuses of culture, Chasteen's emphasis on its subversive aspect highlights the reverse side of the equation. The transgressions allowed during carnival *may*, he says, have emboldened middle-class women to redefine the limits of permissible behaviour in general. This may or may not have been so, but whenever carnival stands analysed by itself, removed from the larger social, economic and religious context, we cannot know how significant it was. Similarly, because the chapters are on different topics and countries, the book's stated aim, 'to communicate an organic view of society' (p. 4), is difficult to achieve. The editors write that the chapters 'present snapshots of these components [of the nation-building process], grouped together in thematic sections that facilitate the linking of individual parts to create a vision of the whole' (p. 4). The best snapshots here are in focus and do not overreach themselves in their conclusions: Acree is persuasive on the reciprocal relationship between independence and print culture, and on the creole elite's efforts to create a new set of symbols; Rugeley is good on the various kinds and subterranean pathways of Catholic sensibility, which explain the survival of religion into the revolutionary era in Mexico, long after its official death knell has been sounded; Conway shows convincingly that the *pollo* figure in Mexico was much closer to the dandy of eighteenth-century Europe, an effete and effeminate ('clothes-wearing') man, than to the common twentieth-century Mexican image of a pathologised sexual deviant. Some of the chapters remain snapshots, while others do offer new and interesting visions of the (impossible) whole.

University of Nottingham ADAM SHARMAN

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Hilda Sábato, *Buenos Aires en armas: la revolución de 1880* (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2008), pp. 333, pb.

This important work is centred on the revolutionary process led by the governor of Buenos Aires province, the *autonomista* Carlos Tejedor, together with the Nationalist