

RECENT BOOKS ON LATIN AMERICAN AND LATINO/A POPULAR CULTURE

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LATINO/A POPULAR CULTURE. Edited by Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero. (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002. Pp. 280. \$55.00 cloth, \$18.50 paper.)

IMAGINATION BEYOND NATION: LATIN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE. Edited by Eva P. Bueno and Terry Caesar. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998. Pp. 314. \$50.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

LATIN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE: AN INTRODUCTION. Edited by William H. Beezley and Linda A. Curcio-Nagy. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000. Pp. 255. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

THE RIDDLE OF CANTIFLAS: ESSAYS ON HISPANIC POPULAR CULTURE. By Ilan Stavans. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998. Pp. 157. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

It is difficult to keep up with the plethora of published monographs and edited books on Latin American and Latino/a popular culture. American university, as well as independent scholarly and commercial presses, have discovered in the past decade that such books have broad appeal. This was not always the case; twenty years ago it was difficult to find a press that would give a publication proposal on popular culture serious consideration. The unspoken response to such proposals seemed to be that the topic itself did not merit serious scholarly consideration. This trend persisted despite the wide U.S. and Latin American distribution of ground-breaking works published mainly in Latin America and Europe. Happily, this situation no longer exists; one finds entire categories in university and other press catalogues devoted to popular culture and cultural studies. In fact, the arrival of cultural and popular culture studies imported from abroad (e.g., Stuart Hall, Nestor García Canclini, Armand Mattelart, and Ariel Dorfman) has given a strong boost to the acceptability of popular culture studies in the United States.

Ironically, the downside of the newfound respectability of popular culture studies in the academy has been a rush to put together monographs and collections of essays—not all of which stand up to high scholarly standards. Three of the books reviewed in this essay do in my opinion meet such standards; one fails to do so.

New authors and editors of popular culture studies owe it to their readers to introduce them to at least some of the theoretical debates surrounding the production of popular and mass culture. Eva P. Bueno and Terry Caesar, the editors of *Imagination Beyond Nation*, have laid out in their introduction some of the most important issues characteristic of a serious study of popular culture in general and the practice of popular culture in Latin America in particular. Using Carlos Estevan Martins' 1962 essay, "For a Popular Revolutionary Art," as representing one end of the theoretical spectrum and Beatriz Sarlo Sabajanes's 1994 book *Escenas de la vida postmoderna* as representing the other end, the editors identify some key issues in their introduction that individual authors raise in the essays that follow. Martins discusses in his essay questions about the nature of art as a social product, the role of intellectuals "in fostering its emancipatory potential" (2), and what he considers to be authentic popular art, namely, popular revolutionary art firmly guided by progressive intellectuals to directly influence and shape the consciousness of the masses. Sarlo, on the other hand, seems to ignore class as she posits the modern shopping mall as a site that offers "extraterritorial culture from which nobody is excluded, even those who cannot buy" (2).

The editors have assembled a variety of theoretical approaches between Martins and Sarlo, including theories associated with Mikhail Bakhtin, Jesús Martín-Barbero, Paul de Man, and Armand Mattelart. They briefly discuss these approaches in order to illustrate that "Latin American popular culture matters in rich and distinctive ways" (4); that is, it is compelling to argue that Latin America is fundamentally different from any other global region. The editors have set forth three points that presumably guided their selection of essays and that served as the book's organizing principle:

1) the study of Latin American popular culture proceeds because fundamental political issues about class, power and art are openly at stake. 2) Popular culture in Latin America explicitly raises questions concerning the relationship between cultural production and consumption. 3) The utopian potential of popular culture is provocatively expressed with special force by Latin American examples.(4)

These are, indeed, core points to consider in any serious scholarly study of Latin American popular culture.

The eleven essays included in *Imagination Beyond Nation* are grouped into four parts: I) Nation as Icon; II) Mediation; III) Nation as Idea; and IV) Beyond Nation. As the editors readily admit, their edited

collection of essays is not inclusive (e.g., there is nothing at all about Bolivia, Colombia, and Ecuador) but they argue that the book was designed not so much as a comprehensive survey but rather “an inquiry into the idea of nationality that the study of popular culture in Latin America makes simultaneously possible and urgent” (12).

I found most of essays to be inherently interesting, well researched, provocative, and theoretically rich; I will comment on just three. The first essay is Jeanne L. Gillespie’s “Gender, Ethnicity and Piety. The Case of the *China Poblana*” which, as the editors observe, constitutes the deepest historical exploration of all the essays. Gillespie explores the connections between a twentieth-century figure, now a Mexican cultural archetype, dressed in traditional garb and the roots of the *china poblana* in the seventeenth-century historical figure of Catarina de San Juan, an Asian woman, very different from the image of a dark-haired young Mexican woman dancing the *jarabe tapatio* wearing a red *rebozo*, green full skirt, etc., that is evoked by the use of the term today. Gillespie traces how the seventeenth-century figure, a nurturing figure, has been manipulated and exploited today into a figure which is used commercially to sell agricultural and food products. The most interesting essay in part II is Nelson Hippolyte Ortega’s essay, “Big Snakes on the Streets and Never Ending Stories,” about the Venezuelan *telenovela*, *Por Estas Calles*. The author analyzes this widely popular cultural product as it is transformed from a truly revolutionary innovation which was openly critical of the Venezuelan government to its much more docile contemporary version completely devoid of sociopolitical content. Milagros Zapata Swerdlow and David Swerdlow, in their Part III essay, “Framing the Peruvian *Cholo*. Popular Art by Unpopular People,” study how ceramic and painted likenesses of the peasant class—a basic form of folk or popular art—produced by an oppressed group of men and women living in remote areas have been commodified by being transformed into highly desired objects found in Peru’s most exclusive boutiques, upper-class homes, and international art dealers’ inventories. The authors comment on the irony that *cholos* themselves do not come close to matching the social acceptability of their products. A fascinating aspect of the article is their nuanced discussion of how the likenesses are perceived and manipulated by various audiences. Simon Webb’s article in Part IV, “Masculinities at the Margins: Representation of the *Malandro* and the *Pachuco*,” compares and contrasts a dominant Brazilian popular figure with one which was prevalent in the U.S. Southwest and California during the 1940s and 1950s. Showing how these figures “have been mobilized and deployed in the discourses of both hegemonic and subaltern cultures, generating an array of contradictory significations” (227), Webb explores some of the vexing theoretical questions regarding popular culture that the editors raise in their introduction.

Like the editors of the previous volume, Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero, the editors of *Latino/a Popular Culture*, have provided a valuable and highly informative discussion of the theoretical questions that underlie the production of popular culture in the twenty-first century. As the title of this collection indicates, the focus of their introduction and of the essays is underrepresented U.S.-Hispanic minority groups (Latinos and Latinas). Their stated aim is “to examine the ways American popular culture has been defining ‘Latina’ and ‘Latino’ during this millennial transition” (2). The editors and contributors alike are generally successful in carrying out this aim to interrogate popular culture forms or narratives for popular consumption that deal with the “emergent signifiers” of “Latina” and “Latino.” The editors are fully aware that the political and economic stakes are high at this crucial time when Hispanics (a U.S. Census designation) have become the country’s largest ethnic minority group and are well on their way to becoming its dominant minority population over the next few decades. The editors have wisely steered clear of trying to formulate a fixed definition of Latina/o popular culture and concentrate instead on the “more fruitful juxtaposition and cross-examination of the mosaic of contradictory and congratulatory images thrown up by the mass media” (2). The editors’ introduction links popular culture’s construction of Latino/Latina identity with issues of class, labor, political economy, language, nationality, and citizenship. The essays themselves take on these issues by exploring power relations embedded in different forms of popular culture.

Although they avoid fixed definitions, the editors have prudently provided a brief but useful discussion of what they have correctly identified as two highly contentious and problematic terms: “Latino” and “popular culture.” They carefully dismantle the popular notion that Latinos constitute a monolithic cultural group sharing the same language, geographical space, and political struggles (i.e., Cuban Americans tend to identify as Republican whereas Chicanos tend to consider themselves Democrats). They also note that within each Latino group are complex class and social stratifications arising from different historical circumstances, place of origin, etc. Many of the contributors provide similarly nuanced discussions of the fluidity of race and ethnic identification.

The editors’ discussion of the term “popular culture” is similarly valuable. They leave no doubt where they stand: “We cast our lot with scholars who argue that popular culture constitutes a terrain where not only ethnic and racial identity is contested, reproduced, and transformed, but also where the struggle for and against social equality is engaged” (6). This theoretical and ideological position is in the tradition of the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall. The dialectical movement of appropriation and resistance of popular culture images and

messages on the part of disparate Latino groups is examined in the essays. This is particularly important as popular culture production and media outlets have increasingly become controlled by what the editors and the contributors consider to be powerful hegemonic forces—both nationally and globally.

The organization of the book is generally based on popular culture genres: Media/Culture (e.g., radio, television, cinema); Music (e.g., video, Hip Hop, *tejano*); Theater and Art (e.g., Broadway productions, Latino theater in Vancouver, performance art, the iconization of Frida Kahlo); and Sports (e.g., baseball, *fútbol*, and boxing). The editors explain that an underlying reason for this genre organization was to make the volume reader friendly, especially for those who might wish to adopt it for classroom use. They have clearly achieved this end.

As in the first volume of essays discussed above, the vast majority of the essays in *Latino/a Popular Culture* are original, thoughtful, theoretically provocative, and well informed. Of the many that I could discuss, I have selected three. The first, Arlene Davila's "Talking Back: Spanish Media and U.S. Latinidad," teases out in an interesting and illuminating way the issues of skin color, class, and language that are embedded in corporate Spanish-language media in the United States. She focused on audience response—such response is noticeably absent in many otherwise fine popular culture studies—and conducted a year-long ethnographic study employing Latino focus groups. In her study, she examines the making of Latino/a advertisements for Spanish television and how these focus groups responded to them. She concludes that representations of Latinidad in the Spanish television networks have generally avoided generic representations of Latinos; instead, they concentrate on so-called niche advertising in which advertising that tended to promote some stereotyping was targeted at individual groups (e.g., a Puerto Rican salsa group as a naïve and misguided representation of all Puerto Ricans regardless of class). Not surprisingly, Dávila discovered that the Latinos she interviewed have internalized "particular dynamics and conventions of Latinidad disseminated in the media" (35). In her essay, "Bidi Bidi Bom Bom: Selena and *Tejano* Music and the Making of *Tejas*," Deborah Vargas explores the ways in which Selena's performance of "Tejas" and the subsequent production of a CD based on the performance provide material for a fascinating study of the discursive and geopolitical "place" representative of Texas-Mexican cultural production. Rather than a media production thrust upon its audience, she views the entire production process of *Tejas* as a collective and community expression of cultural practices of Texans of Mexican descent (*tejanos*) including "Tex-Mex language, racialized working-class aesthetics, and counterhegemonic historical narratives" (118). Moreover, Vargas considers Selena's posthumous legacy to have

made a significant indentation on the discursive psyche of Anglo-Texas colonialism as well as on the “masculinized embodiment of Tejano music” (124). Gregory Rodríguez’s essay, “Boxing and Masculinity: The History and (Her)story of Oscar de la Hoja,” analyzes audience responses—especially those of women—to this outstanding young Latino boxer’s self-presentation as a heterogeneous male but one whose image does not conform to traditional notions of Latino masculinity. That he refuses to perform within these strict parameters and instead chooses to show a “softer” and more emotionally available side of himself accounts for the divergent responses among the fans whom Rodríguez interviewed.

William H. Beezley and Linda A. Curcio-Nagy, the editors of *Latin American Popular Culture: An Introduction*, have provided an outstanding collection of essays which “examine different expressions of popular culture, how such cultures and such expressions emerged, who used them, and what changed them” (xix). They have identified five “threads” that form the fabric of the essays: 1) the invention of traditions, 2) the creation of national identity, 3) the formation of gender roles, 4) the prevalence of ethnicity, and 5) the dynamic interplay between textual deconstruction and performance analysis (xix). In their selection of essays, the editors remain true to their concept of popular culture as it appears throughout the book—defining everyday culture and identifying “a set of behavioral practices with pervasive, ordinary character” and acknowledging “the general acceptance of these practices, their roots in common knowledge, and their frequent expression in non-written form” (xi). As is made clear elsewhere in the introduction, the editors are fully aware of written forms of popular culture that are widely distributed and consumed (e.g., newspapers, *fotonovelas*, romance and other genre magazines, popular and para-literature such as detective and romance novels, comic books, comic strips, and *literatura de cordel*), but they have made a deliberate choice to include essays that deal with non-written expressions (oral traditions, music, visual imagery, dance, and family food). Although they briefly refer to the “incessant give-and-take” of popular culture with so-called high or elite cultures and to the relationship of mass or commercial culture to popular culture, a more extended discussion of these vexing areas of popular culture study would have been useful, especially for the reader not familiar with the scholarly debates over these and related issues. In differentiating between mass-produced culture (e.g., cinema, television, pop music) and popular culture, the editors argue convincingly that popular culture sometimes arises spontaneously from the masses. They offer the example of Brazilian *samba* whose form and message have been altered in the transition from its neighborhood base to the recording studio. The editors have captured the characteristics of at least

some—but definitely not all—forms of popular culture: the encapsulation of “the pleasure in everyday life,” humor, its sometimes “raw edge bordering on vulgarity,” and its pattern of drawing on the vernacular (4). I found the majority of the essays to be thoroughly researched and well written. Many of them focus on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expressions of popular culture, making this book a valuable complement to *Imagination Beyond Nation* which is more contemporary in its focus.

The Riddle of Cantinflas: Essays on Hispanic Popular Culture has little to recommend itself as a popular culture reader. Ilan Stavans, the book’s author, provides no introduction but only a preface in which he suggests that popular culture—at least as it is practiced in the Hispanic world—is synonymous with kitsch. This facile equation of the two phenomena unfortunately establishes from the outset a dismissive tone that is carried through in the individual essays. This is in stark contrast to the three books reviewed above. Both the preface and the essays tell us more about the author than about popular culture. Stavans frequently comes off as condescending in equating popular culture with kitsch, which perhaps reflects a bias toward so-called high art. He also takes great liberties in “trashing” (his word) writers such as Laura Esquivel and Sandra Cisneros. For those readers who share Stavans’ apparent disdain for popular culture, this will be an entertaining and conspiratorial read, but I do not recommend it for the reader who is interested in an informed and serious consideration of the complexity of popular culture production and consumption in the Latin American or Latino world.

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