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READINGS ON COLOMBIA?

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Armando Silva. Punto de vista ciudadano. Focalizacion visual y puesta en escena del graffiti [Urban Point of View: The Visual Focus and Staging of Graffiti]. Series Minor, xxix. Bogota: Cato y Cuervo, 1987. 86 pages.

Peter C. Rollins and John J. Deveny, Jr. (eds.). "Culture and Development in Colombia: Study of Changes in Social Roles, Religion, Literature, Material Culture, and Mass Communications in a Third World Context," Journal of Popular Culture, 22:1 (Summer 1988). 302 pages.

Alvaro Camacho G. (ed.). La Colombia de hoy: sociologia y sociedad [Colombia Today: Sociology and Society]. Bogota: Editorial CEREC, 1986. 263 pages.

As a third grader on my way to school, I vividly remember seeing graffiti for the first time in the late 1940s in my native Oklahoma hamlet of 1500. The protective and motherly sign, "Drive slowly. Don't kill a child," had been amended with "Wait for a Teacher." The refrain struck me as so outrageously funny that I insisted on sharing its wit with my teacher and later at the supper table with my parents. The next day the sign had been duly cleaned up and restored to its former orthodoxy. In time my reflection on the incident grew into a subversive revelation for a properly trained kid from a respectable local family. The idea that a teacher, or any authority figure, could or should be challenged was hypnotic. The knowledge that some hidden force had the courage to strike at the system was intriguing, but seeing that someone also protected the established order suggested caution. That graffiti left me with a nagging doubt about all systems and always reminded me of the possibility of a radical response.

I must confess that today, however, I find most graffiti inane, offensive, and insulting. It steals space, defiles another's property, and is a public eyesore. For its victim, it is a snake in the grass and a thief in the night. Undoubtedly a primeval urge exists to express the unmentionable, the unconventional, and the unprintable, not because society is authoritarian or evil but because a beast is lurking in all of us that we would like to let out and give free rein to on occasion but which would ordinarily be better locked up and hidden away. Nevertheless, graffiti's penetrating power can unmask the pretensions of an individual a society, or an age, and herein lies its chief value.

Scholarly work on graffiti is rare. Armando Silva's second book on the subject moves us away from his wide-ranging collection of graffiti from Colombia's main cities (as was the case with his first book *Una ciudad imaginada. Graffiti y expresion urbana* [The Imagined City: Graffiti and Urban Expression]) to an attempt at an all-encompassing theory or ontological definition of graffiti.

For Silva, graffiti must possess seven qualities. First is its marginality. Through graffiti those messages are expressed that cannot be made public elsewhere, either because of the lack of a medium or because the message is directed at a sector that is only impacted though graffiti, or because legal, moral or social factors prevent its expression in any other form. Second is its anonymous character. Graffiti is

unsigned; its authority is unknown. Graffiti responds to a desire to express oneself and in the process obeys a certain spontaneity that is effected in the moment of its creation or appearance. The place elected, the design employed, the colors used, and the aspects of its setting constitute the "fundamental strategies of graffiti" and mark an "esthetic" evaluation in graffiti. Speed inheres in the execution of graffiti, since its author always runs the risk of being observed and discovered. The precariousness of the instruments and materials used in the realization of graffiti tends to spring from the necessity that they be inexpensive, easy to obtain, and simple and practical in their ability to be transported. Finally, its fleetingness [fugacidad] depends on its ephemeral duration, since there is no guarantee of permanence. Graffiti can disappear or be modified or transformed immediately after its execution. From this point of view speed inheres in its execution and fleetingness resides in the duration of its original message. If the expression does not have these seven qualities, then, according to Silva, it is not graffiti. These seven essences together function as an appropriate definition.

Silva could have but did not explore other relevant avenues, such as what the psychological impact of graffiti is on the creators and receivers of the message or whether in an age of free speech there really is a place for graffiti. Finally, readers looking for a Colombian focus in this book will be disappointed. While the author is Colombian and uses some Colombian examples of graffiti, his purpose is to craft a working definition of graffiti. There is nothing specifically Colombian or even Latin American in any of his findings.

Readers looking for a Colombian connection will find one in the 1988 summer issue of the *Journal of Popular Culture*, a bilingual number dedicated to the study of Colombia. It includes an introduction and twelve essays or articles, first in English and then again in Spanish, cosponsored by the Kellogg Foundation and the Center for Popular Culture. In general the work is a hodgepodge of impressionistic essays by authors who, with two or three exceptions, are not Colombianists and who are only marginally informed about the country. The contributions usually reveal more about the authors and their gringo culture than about Colombia. Nevertheless, they do make the case, sometimes inadvertently, that Colombia deserves more attention. Marvin Alisky, the veteran media specialist on Latin America, castigates the United States media for incorrectly spelling "Colombia" as "columbia," and then his own essay is embarrassingly marred with the "columbian town" of Armero (p. 12).

Steffin W. Schmidt's essay, "The Origins of Gender Values: Notes on the Colombian Case" would have been on a sounder footing and better substantiated in a Colombian context if he had consulted appropriate sources on gender in Colombia, such as Pedro Maria Ibanez's *Chronicles of Bogota*[1] for the colonial period, Isaac Holton's effort[2] for the nineteenth century, or the classic works on the subject by Virginia Gutierrez de Pineda.[3] Schmidt's argument, that since Spanish is a "genderized" language, "the importance of this in the symbolic and behavioral role of gender in society is absolutely pervasive" (p. 26), sounds like so much claptrap. To prove his case, he emphasizes how "house is La casa (feminine) [and] automobile is El carro (masculine)" (p.26), as if Spanish American women do not drive cars or as if "the home" in Spanish is not the masculine "el hogar." Such dribble has no place in a scholarly journal.

In the same uninformed boat passing in the night is Bevis Byfield's "The Need for Liberation Theology in Colombia and the Third World," where he sermonizes for churches "to strengthen their administrative structures in order to support the struggle of the poor, and develop programs which seek to bring about social change" (p.50). There is no analysis of specific Colombian problems. Byfield is oblivious to the Colombian forerunner of liberation theology, Camilo Torres, whose frustration sprang from the opposition of the administrative structures of the church and who, before he was killed by the Colombian army, was fast approaching the position of destroying administrative structures rather than strengthening them.

On the other hand, Carlos A. Leon's "Field Notes on Culture, Behavior, and Health," is a sensitive and

insightful contribution on the role culture plays in specific Colombian cases of behavioral and mental health problems. Also effective is Kathleen Gladden's "Women in Industrial Development: The Case of Medellin, Colombia," which presents a succinct overview of the textile industry in Medellin and women's role in the process. She concludes with a case study of fifteen women workers in a Medellin garment factory and then suggests directions for further research.

Three contributions treat Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Colombia's prizewinning writer. Robert N. Pierce points out the role that the cross fertilization of journalism and fiction played in the career of Garcia Marquez, who was a newspaper reporter first. However, Pierce's mutation of the Colombian prototype farmer Juan Valdes into Jose Valdez (p. 69) does not inspire confidence.

Cida S. Chase emphasizes the role violence has played in the works of Garcia Marquez. However, her blanket conclusion that Garcia Marquez's short stories demonstrate that "he is a writer committed almost exclusively to the cause of aesthetics in literature and to the ahistorical themes of life and death" (p. 81) should be qualified. Many of his stories have historical settings and are consistent with a thorough reading of the historical literature then available to Garcia Marquez and thus suggest he was far more aware of Colombian history than is generally realized. Certainly in his more mature novels like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The General in his Labyrinth* he demonstrates a knowledge of historical facts that he could only have gotten from certain historical records. One other complaint is Chase's annoying habit of shifting from correctly using the author's two surnames of Garcia Marquez to just using the last, Marquez, which she does on at least fourteen occasions.

John J. Deveny, Jr. and Juan Manuel Marcos's "Women and Society in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*," is a useful analysis. Their tripartite feminine typology--patriarchal, servile, and rebel--has some merit. However, the authors' moralizing about Garcia Marquez having "had a magnificent opportunity to become partially reconciled to a more objective and optimistic view of women" (p. 89) is entirely misplaced. Garcia Marquez's characters have consistently restated his belief that the human race is flawed, a defect that women share equally with men.

It is unfortunate that Jeffrey C. Bauer's three paintings in his "Artistic Reflections of a Trip to Colombia: Symbolic Vision and Creative Thinking," were not available to us in color, since the artist writes eloquently about how important color was to their final production. Even though the bus in the painting "Pre-Colombia 1.982," appears in the article only in shades of white, gray, and black, Bauer has still captured something of the elusive Colombian reality, especially the bus's intricate stylized patterns that are obviously taken from pre-Columbian art forms of Colombia.

Arnold R. Alanen's "Architecture and Landscapes in Colombia: The Viability of the Vernacular," has useful photographs of various architectural forms in Colombia. However, this brief first trip to Colombia on the part of Alanen precludes any fundamental insight into Colombian architecture in spite of the author's obvious architectural expertise. Only two printed works on Colombia are even cited, and none in Spanish, as if the Colombians had never produced anything of significance on the subject.

In their article, "The University: Ambiguous Symbol of Social Mobility," Benjamin Alvarez and Alirio Ortiz show how education as a promise for social mobility has worked in Colombia. This function of education has led to a dramatic increase in the number of people seeking a university degree but not necessarily with any assurance of social mobility. Encrusted in the essay is the phrase "distance education," which is never explained either in the English or Spanish version but undoubtedly means "university extension" or extension education, and is just mistranslated from the Spanish.

Leonardo Ferreira and Joseph Straubhaar's "Radio and the New Colombia," is by far the best contribution in the volume. They succinctly cover the history of radio in Colombia, analyzing private and commercial operations and government attempts, ultimately unsuccessful, to monopolize radio broadcasting. Their overview of radio programming is illuminating, and their description of the

different radio networks and ownership is solid. Much of their success comes from a thorough grounding in appropriate Colombian sources.

Overall this number of the *Journal of Popular Culture* manifests weak editorial skills. Undoubtedly the editors were not comfortable with Spanish nor familiar with Colombia. In their introductory essay they erroneously claim "Colombia spends twenty-six times more on university education than on primary schooling" (p. 4), having misread the contribution of Alvarez and Ortiz that qualifies the spending on public education with "per-student" (p. 124). Other errors of fact that slip through are that women's suffrage comes to Colombia in 1957 (p. 29) and Bogota was founded in 1583 (p. 102) when in fact these events occurred in 1954 and 1538. Who the Reverend Beyis Byfield and Juan Manuel Marcos are is never revealed, even though the other contributors are appropriately identified. The Spanish version appears in eight or nine different fonts, and footnotes and bibliography are not always consistently carried over from the English.

The collection of essays appearing in *La Colombia de hoy: Sociologia y sociedad* [Colombia Today: Sociology and Society], does not suffer from these problems. In fact, the collection is a revelation. Here we have Colombian sociologists thoroughly familiar with contemporary Colombia. They leave sterile theory and political debate aside and discuss current Colombian reality in concrete and unambiguous terms and at a high level of exchange that is truly profitable for anyone wanting a deeper understanding of Colombia. This product of the Second Colombia Colloquium of Sociology that met at the Universidad del Valle, Call, Colombia, in December 1985 includes some of Colombia's leading intellectuals.

Orlando Fals Borda, as the dean of Colombian sociology, who co-founded the Department of Sociology at the National University in Bogota along with the late Father Camilo Torres, appropriately opened the sessions. In his address he traces his crusade to rescue the Colombian coast from its forgotten condition. In this effort he has developed what he claims to be a unique methodology of sociology called Participatory Action Investigation [Investigacion Accion Participativa, IAP] in which the investigation carries with it consciousness-raising methods designed to transform and change the condition of society. It was the task of Gustavo de Roux to respond to Fals Borda, and while he accepts the methodological validity of IAP at the micro-regional level, he doubts its applicability at the macro level. IAP is intended to liberate sociology from its traditional cultural limitations. In the process the researcher is involved in an activist role in social movements, not only as a participant but as a catalyst. Roux concludes that IAP is more method than knowledge.

Francisco Leal analyzes the present-day political scene. He advances the intriguing hypothesis that Colombian structures have always been fragile because the dominant classes have always been weak and historically have never exercised real control and hegemony. An increase in this political vacuum, he argues, explains President Belisario Betancur's (1982-1986) attempted democratic opening whose failure discredited his government. Within this democratic opening Colombians saw a bewildering array of different actors--the military, guerrillas, labor unions, the political establishment, the democratic left, campesinos [peasants], workers, the middle classes, the hierarchy of the Church with which Betancur desperately searched for some combination that would offer stability to the Colombian political system. Given this political chaos, Leal proposes a national reform to the Colombian Constitution of 1886 that would bring a new political-administrative system, more federalism (locally elected mayors and governors), and a unicameral national congress, some of which have since come to pass. Gabriel Restrepo, Leal's respondent, on the other hand, does not see the Colombian political system in such disarray and is more optimistic, especially in view of Colombia's strong economic performance.

Also taking exception to Leal's thesis of the incomplete consolidation of a national hegemonic order by the dominant classes is the co-contribution of Alvaro Camacho and Alvaro Guzman who argue that

violence is the dominant characteristic of the Colombian political system. Colombian politics and violence go hand-in-hand, and, as the latter increases, more and more democratic and civilized options are closed, so that violence and imposition become the only alternatives. The authors even try to create a typology of violence: violence towards the State and property, Mafia violence, civil and moral violence. In response, Jorge Hernandez Lara thinks Camacho and Guzman have a fixation on violence as an inherently Colombian characteristic because of their personal experiences. In contrast, he applauds President Betancur's leadership as a "peculiar mixture of nationalism, democracy, and pacifism" (p. 106) that allows him to catch the popular waves that sweep over Colombia.

Rodrigo Parra links sociology and literature together in an analysis of recent Colombian novels. He shows how these literary works define and delineate the essence of Colombia within the Colombian context and the present crisis. The respondent, Renan Silva, would prefer that Parra expend his energy in developing an appropriate sociological language and its metaphor to explain Colombian reality.

Juan Camilo Ruiz traces his own migration from the country to Medellin and relates how his fantasies became a traumatic nightmare. He characterizes Colombian cities as unequal, unjust, insufficient, segregated, and oppressive. He argues for a democratic change for all Colombian cities so that urban land would be at the service of the public. There would be order and structure in land development even at the regional level. Fiscal and administrative reform would accompany investment, and employment would go preferentially to locals. There would be common areas and spaces for democracy, so that cities would not become jungles.

Fabio Velasquez in response picks up the jungle metaphor and underscores how most city dwellers face violence, misery, inundation by flood waters or mud slides, no work, no income, no protector, and no future. Life and survival go to the strongest. He blames the jungle culture of the city on the two determinants of capitalism and an almost permanent state of siege that places much of Colombia under continual martial law.

Other contributors trace recent urbanization trends, the advances of women, and changes in the countryside that show Colombia going through the same modernization patterns as the developed and developing world.

In summary, the works reviewed reveal that an understanding of Colombian popular culture and history comes from reading works on the subject by contributors familiar with the country, fluent in its language, and thoroughly grounded in its contemporary situation.

NOTES

1. *Cronicas de Bogota* (2a. ed.; 4 vols.; Bogota: Imprenta Nacional, 1913-23).

2. *New Granada: Twenty Months in the Andes* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1857).

3. *La familia en Colombia* (Bogota: Universidad Nacional, 1963) and *Familia y cultura en Colombia* (Bogota: Tercer Mundo, 1968).

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