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Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing

Garcia, Ivonne M.

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Arendt precisely when elements of the classical private realm—labor, for example, or domestic life—come to be seen as public concerns. It might be argued that Okker’s misreading of Arendt, coming as it does in a footnote, is not central to the argument of her book. But I see it as symptomatic of a more fundamental problem: too often such categories as public life, civil society, the social, and the intimate remain vaguely defined and therefore diminished as useful tools of analysis. The magazine novel represents a fascinating moment in the history of American civic life, traversing as it does so many areas of life that we often assume to be mutually exclusive. *Social Stories* provides a good starting point, but there is still work to be done on exactly how it challenges those boundaries and participates in the changing configuration of nineteenth-century American civic identity.

Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing.
By Kirsten Silva Gruesz. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2002.
xxi, 293 pp. Illus. Index. \$21.95.

Reviewed by *Ivonne M. García*
The Ohio State University

Walt Whitman, in his “New Orleans in 1848,” predicted: “I have an idea that there is much and of importance about the Latin race contributions [sic] to American nationality in the south and southwest that will never be put with sympathetic understanding and tact on record” (cited in Gruesz, 125). Kirsten Silva Gruesz’s *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* not only contributes the missing record bemoaned by Whitman, but it does so with the stated mission of providing both “a historical grounding for contemporary Latino identity” in the United States and of imagining “a new form of U.S. cultural history in general: one that would unseat the fiction of American literature’s monolingual and Anglocentric roots and question the imperial conflation of the United States with America” (4). Framing the “American Renaissance” of the 1840s and 1850s within the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1846, and the filibustering interventions in Central America and the Caribbean in the 1850’s, Gruesz re-envision this period “in terms of the development of U.S. expansionism” (11), and examines the role of Latin America “as testing ground of U.S. experiments with extranational power” in the formation of U.S. narratives of identity (13).

Gruesz specifically focuses on periodical poems and essays published between the 1820s and the 1860s by canonical U.S. poets, such as Whitman and Longfellow, and Latin American and Latino poets, such as the Cuban-born José María Heredia and the Colombian Rafael Pombo, who are less well known to U.S. audiences. Through five chapters each divided into four subsections, Gruesz applies an

historicist approach (complemented by borderlands theory) to contextualize the work of nineteenth-century U.S. and Latin American/Latino poets in a way that, within currently changing U.S. demographics, seeks “not so much to accommodate Latinos to an existing national tradition, but to reconfigure that tradition to acknowledge the continuous presence of Latinos within and around it” (10).

A key part of Gruesz’s reconfiguration is her interest in refuting claims that no “meaningful literary presence of Latinos or of the Spanish language within the United States” can be found until the mid-twentieth century (xi). In establishing the Spanish language as an important locus in her discussion, Gruesz examines translations of U.S. poetry into Spanish (including the popular translations of Longfellow’s poems disseminated throughout Latin America) and of Spanish-language poetry into English (including Longfellow’s own translations). Gruesz historicizes this common nineteenth-century trend within the rise of U.S. expansionism, noting that: “Translated language follows, if not precedes, the accomplishment of *translation imperii*, the movement of empire” (2).

Of particular interest in her discussion of language is the fact that these Spanish-language writers, who hailed from very different locations within Central and South America and the Caribbean, envisioned Spanish as a transnational vehicle that enabled them to imagine a *población española* in the United States where the adjective meant not the Spanish nationality but the language (113). This adjectival appropriation “encouraged a dual identification with the transnational space of Spain and Latin America as well as with fellow Spanish speakers . . . in the United States” promoting “the possibility of a specifically Latino vision” (114).

For students of U.S. literature, Gruesz’s discussions of Longfellow and Whitman are particularly significant, especially since she suggests that Longfellow’s *Evangeline* can be read as a “national allegory” that may have been influenced by the Mexican invasion (90-91). About Whitman, whose *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1855, Gruesz suggests that the three months he spent in New Orleans, “precisely when the Hispanophone print community wielded its greatest influence” (109), were later reflected in both the content and the form of his canonized work.

While Gruesz’s work is somewhat limited by her focus on poetry, she does highlight the prominence of lyric poetry in Spanish-language periodicals of the time and suggests that while the ideological discourses of fiction have been amply studied, her study contributes to the understanding of poetry’s “potential role in shaping larger ideological formations” (6) in the nineteenth-century United States. Gruesz notes how poetry has been “largely neglected in recent historicist analysis of nineteenth-century literary culture” (21), and proposes that the connections between Spanish-language and Anglo-American

(her term) poets created “a hemispheric imaginary” (37) that her work illuminates. In this light, Gruesz points to the fact that nineteenth-century Spanish periodicals, unlike their English-language counterparts, published more poetry than serial fiction (142).

Gruesz’s specific discussion of Spanish-language periodicals within the United States, the first of which was founded in New Orleans in 1806, is particularly fascinating, especially when she indicates that prior to the Civil War there were at least twenty-three Spanish periodicals published in New Orleans—“the undisputed capital of Hispanophone print production” (111)—followed far behind by New York City, where thirteen such periodicals were published. In discussing the editors and writers of the two main nineteenth-century periodicals, *La Patria* and *El Mundo Nuevo/La América Ilustrada*, Gruesz gives her readers a taste of a time when the U.S. imaginary had not yet become monolingual and when a print community of Spanish-language editors, writers and readers dreamed of “preserving an integrated America as an inspirational ideal if not a political reality” (189).

Gruesz’s goal of locating the print community of Spanish-language periodicals at the threshold of U.S. Latino writing, and of doing so within a transamerican context that challenges the “imperial conflation of America with the United States” (10), makes her work a keenly insightful, useful and timely contribution to the field of New American Studies envisioned by Americanists such as John Carlos Rowe and Donald E. Pease. Gruesz’s work further contributes to Latin American, Caribbean and Latino studies precisely because she connects well-known and not-so-well-known figures of the nineteenth-century Spanish-language literary and political world with their sojourns in the United States, specifically in the urban centers of New York City and New Orleans. These “editors on the border,” as Gruesz identifies them, “became small-scale ambassadors of culture, speaking to the local community on behalf of world culture at large and representing their readership before that wider audience” (20).

Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book.
By Gerard Jones. New York: Basic Books, 2004. ix, 384 pp. Illus.
Index. \$26.00

Reviewed by *Jared Gardner*
Ohio State University

There have been many books over the years that have attempted to offer a history of the rise of the comic book as a form and an industry from its earliest years in the 1930s. Like the early comics themselves, the vast majority of these books tell their stories in broad strokes of Good and Evil, Villain and Victim, Superhero and Criminal Mastermind. Many of these books come from a fan-culture with its own his-