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Review of Native and National in Brazil (Hispanic American Historical Review)

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Native and National in Brazil: Indigeneity after Independence.
By TRACY DEVINE GUZMÁN. First Peoples: New Directions in Indigenous Studies.

This book addresses the ways in which Brazilian society has represented its Indians for
the last century and a half. Using the concepts of Indianness (“imagined representations
of difference” [p. 14]) and indigeneity (“lived experience” [p. 14]) as the backbone of her
analysis, the author explores various facets of indigenism and a wide range of situations,
from ludicrous pop shows, operas, and novels to the Paraguayan War, interethnic
marriages, education, land rights, legislation, state policies, and the thorny issue of
authenticity. All this is based on solid documentation, including some outstanding
illustrations. Both her extensive research in archives and interviews bring about crucial
problems of representation that have plagued interethnic relations since the sixteenth
century and have kept the Indians in a continuous state of domination and subalternity
vis-à-vis the national society. The book makes theoretical incursions into history,
anthropology, education, and philosophy, sometimes with rather dense language but
never losing sight of the realities inherent to interethnic inequality. Each of the five
chapters, plus the introduction and epilogue, focuses on a specific aspect of the tra-
jectory of indigenism in the recent history of Brazil. The introduction gives an over-
view of the domination of indigenous peoples by analyzing a children’s television show
that degrades the image of the Indian, while the epilogue highlights the achievements
of indigenous personalities, national leaders, and intellectuals toward raising national
conscience regarding the dignity and legitimacy of the Indian as a social and political
actor. In the words of indigenous activists, their “traditional knowledge can bring about a
better world” (p. 200). In between, Tracy Devine Guzmán examines the consequences of
indigenous exploitation and subordination in a number of different contexts, namely
the nineteenth-century Paraguayan War (to which a number of Terena Indians were
recruited), development schemes in the Amazon, the positivist style of official colo-
nization, the remarkable national repercussions of a mixed marriage (a white man with
an Indian woman), and, in chapter 5, the contemporary indigenous movement, both in
Brazil and abroad, which has critiqued the notion of national sovereignty and how it
denies indigenous autonomy.

The book presents materials very rarely used in analyses of indigenism in Brazil,
thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the complex field of interethnic relations
in a country (or a world) where indigenous peoples have mostly been relegated to
national irrelevance. The strategy of beginning some chapters with vignettes that serve as
mottos for serious analysis about the place of the Indians in the popular imagination, in
state policies, and in journalistic portrayals is effective and methodologically sound.
However, one would like to know more about how the author developed her research,
particularly regarding fieldwork among indigenous peoples, whether all her interviewees
spoke Portuguese, in what contexts the interviews were carried out, how long she stayed
in the villages (or elsewhere), and other details relevant to data collecting. Particularly
useful would be an account of the author’s relationship with the indigenous intellectuals who play such a significant role in the book.

In the context of the growing literature on indigenism, Devine Guzmán makes a fine contribution, particularly in working with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century documents and with the written production of indigenous intellectuals. There is, however, a tendency to collapse events of different periods into the flow of analysis, producing a flattening effect and giving the false impression that nothing has changed over 160 years. In fact, what is missing in the book is the exploration of the difference between phenomena of the longue durée surviving across decades (the issue of tutorship, for instance) and those that change as policies, dispositions, and expectations change (for example, the condition of indigenous education today as compared to some 30 years ago). Equally absent is a discussion of the fundamental role of the church, both in the past and in contemporary indigenism. Indigenism is made up of both continuities and changes in a dialectical relationship, which defies any ultimate prognostics.

With its wide range of themes, rich documentation, and detailed analysis, Native and National in Brazil is a welcome addition to the growing literature on indigenism in Brazil and the Americas. It is of interest to students of Latin American history, anthropology, native studies, and, especially, the study of indigenism both in Brazil and in general. Finally, the author’s credit to Brazilian nonindigenous authors (not always the case) and her respect and praise for indigenous voices are worth acknowledging.

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Chinese Cubans is now the standard text on the history of the Chinese in Cuba. Utilizing a transnational and hemispheric approach, Kathleen López examines the history of Chinese immigration to Cuba from 1847 to the present. In many significant ways, she revises our understanding of Chinese migration to Cuba during the coolie trade and the subsequent waves of Chinese settlement that took place between 1902 and 1959. As her overarching aim, López seeks to explain “how racist ideologies in a multiethnic society, class stratification, gender imbalance, kinship and business networks, and generational differences converged to shape Chinese identities in Cuba” (p. 5). She accomplishes this goal quite superbly.

Chinese Cubans makes an outstanding contribution to the recent literature on Asians in Latin America, which includes works such as Julia María Schiavone Camacho’s Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910–1960 (2012), Grace Peña Delgado’s Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the US-Mexico Borderlands (2012), and my own The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940 (2010). During the early twentieth century, Cuba and Mexico formed important nodes of a