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Review of Rafael Climent-Espino and Ana M. Gómez-Bravo, eds., *Food, Texts, and Cultures in Latin America and Spain*

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Climent-Espino, Rafael and Ana M. Gómez-Bravo, eds. *Food, Texts, and Cultures in Latin America and Spain*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2020. 372 pp.

This useful new volume offers a detailed review of food studies literature, explores various interdisciplinary approaches, and features thirteen essays on Spanish and Latin American history, eight of which have been translated to English. Expanding the audience for important scholars whose studies have previously appeared mainly in Spanish or Portuguese, the work of Gómez Bravo in translating six of these (four with Matthew Kullberg) is particularly commendable.

In their introduction, Gómez-Bravo and Climent-Espino argue that food studies—underpinned by its explosive popular culture appeal of recent decades—has the potential to constitute the ultimate nexus of academic intersectionality. They point to a growing body of scholarship that uses food as a lens through which to view colonial studies, ethnic and racial studies, gender and sexuality studies, theories of embodiment and identity, and studies of power dynamics, nationalism, and nation building. The volume’s editors see particular value in what Ronald Tobin calls *gastrocriticism*. Used in this volume most explicitly by Climent-Espino and Rita De Maeseneer, it serves as a new tool for analyzing food references in literature in terms of “personal, political, gendered and national identities, as well as aesthetic and social movements” (5). As the title suggests, Gómez-Bravo and Climent-Espino conceptualize food as occupying space “in a textually coded signifying and signifier universe” (17) that is directly related to materiality and the body. Issues related to patterns of practice, which can be more challenging to tease from evidence, receive felicitous attention in several of the chapters.

Three essays in the volume illustrate how recipes and cookery books can be interpreted. Carolyn Nadeau’s “Furniture and Equipment in the Royal Kitchens of Early Modern Spain” focuses on the cooking tools and appurtenances described in the 1611 *Arte de Cocina, Pastelería, Vizcochería, y Conservería*, authored by Francisco Martínez Montañón, the head of Philip III’s and Philip IV’s kitchens. Nadeau’s analysis of the culinary technology used by early modern Spanish royal cooks contributes usefully to the broader picture we have of the specific material culture objects and cooking techniques used by those who fed the royal courts of Europe. María Paz Moreno’s “Beyond the Recipes: Authorship, Text, and Context in Canonical Spanish Cookbooks” offers a critical reading of the works of Francisco Martínez Montañón (1611), Juan de Altamira (1745), María Mestayer de Echagüe (1940), and Ignasi Doménech (1941). The

absence of a text in the analysis dating from the nineteenth century—when tremendously significant changes in Spanish food habits took place alongside an explosion in cookbook publishing—is confounding. Yet Moreno illustrates how eighteenth-century monastic cooking differed from that in royal kitchens, how cookbook authors and chefs such as Mestayer de Echagüe wielded “culinary capital” as a form of social and economic power, and how Doménech’s work featured a double narrative of acquiescence with, and opposition to, the Franco regime. Paula Caldo’s “Cooks and Ladies: The Writing of Culinary Knowledge in Argentina in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries” explores issues of authorship and of cultural context. Caldo emphasizes the collective role of elite women cookbook authors in defining a distinctive Argentinian cuisine as a syncretic fusion of indigenous practices with French and British influences. She contextualizes this process within the period’s vibrant publishing market and within the burgeoning consumer culture that branded and redefined certain foods and their recommended uses in early twentieth century Argentinian cuisine.

Four chapters in the volume treat the use of food-related themes in literature. In “A Gastrocritical Reading of Miguel Ángel Asturias’s Early Narrative: *Legends of Guatemala, The President, and Men of Maize*,” Rafael Climent-Espino places food at the center of his analysis. He shows how Asturias used food production, distribution, and preparation as a marker of gender relations, social hierarchy, political conflict, and the dichotomous models of nature defining the Maya and Mestizo mental universes. In his “Still Life, Food, and Fiction: Diversions from the Colonial Baroque,” Rodrigo Labriola builds on the scholarship that connects the *bodegones* tradition in art to Spanish Golden Age literature. Shifting that discussion to Mesoamerica, where first encounters focused on the urgent matter of food rather than gold, Labriola argues that colonial baroque travel literature helped to transform accounts of new foods from the imaginable into the plausible. Unlike other European *memento mori* paintings, Spanish *bodegones* required, according to Labriola, a “subjective, temporal, and localized reading” that took both new world and peninsular sensibilities into account (111). In “On Hunger and Brazilian Literature,” Sabrina Sedlmayer analyzes the work of Graciliano Ramos, Clarice Lispector, Guimarães Rosa, Raduan Nassar, and Bartolomeu Campos de Queirós. She argues that these twentieth-century Brazilian authors collectively represent a literary vein that treats hunger apart from its exogenous and endogenous causes and that “pushes away referentiality and takes the shape of a search for the right words that could express this lack that challenges us restlessly” (335). And Rita De Maeseneer’s “Food in Recent Cuban Literature (1990-2016): From Hero in the Special Period Fiction to

Almost Zero in the Generation Zero,” compares the work of Zoé Valdéz, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, and Leonardi Padura Fuentes, produced during a period characterized by alimentary scarcity, with recent novels by Ahmel Echevarría, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, Jorge Enrique Lage, and Legna Rodríguez Iglesias, written when food supplies became more abundant. De Maeseneer finds that “changes in the extra-textual circumstances” (356) alone do not explain the dramatic reduction in food references; rather, the shift can be attributed to the Generation Zero’s commitment to a new, more eclectic and intimate poetics that rejects hyperrealist referentiality.

The essays in the volume by Ana M. Gómez-Bravo, María Ángeles Pérez Samper, and María del Carmen Simón Palmer are built on a wider variety of sources. Gómez-Bravo’s “Food, Blood, and a Jewish *Raza* in Fifteenth-Century Spain,” explores the relationship between alimentary practices and late medieval religious ascription through inquisitors’ chronicles, legal and medical texts, poetry, and a range of medieval and early modern writing. She argues that food was initially a more important marker of purity than lineage for *conversos* and that the focus on their food intake—and on the purportedly distinctive odor such culinary practices generated—laid the groundwork for racialized conceptions based on blood, and ultimately, purity of blood statutes. These ideas later underpinned legal prohibitions on Jewish contact with both food and medicines meant for Christians, further institutionalizing antisemitism in the Spanish market economy. Pérez Samper’s essay, “Enlightened Meals: Literary Perspectives on Food in Eighteenth-Century Spain,” considers the works of Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, Ramón de la Cruz, José Clavijo y Fajardo, Juan Meléndez Valdés, and Francisco Gregorio de Salas. Examining treatises on philosophy and agricultural reform, popular theater, journalism, poetry, and dictionaries, Pérez Samper finds that eighteenth-century Spanish Enlightenment authors shared a series of specific concerns with respect to food and society. Abhorring the excesses of the elite, they criticized conspicuous consumption a century before Thorstein Veblen. Their discontent with social and nutritional differentiation was coupled with exaltations of the countryside as the bearer of a regionally based Spanish “gastronomic tradition” (158). Foreshadowing the late nineteenth and early twentieth century efforts to create a Spanish nationalist culinary culture, Enlightenment writers such as Ramón de la Cruz bemoaned French dominance of *haute cuisine* under Bourbon rule. The impact of foreign chefs on Spanish cuisine is explored by Simón Palmer in “Madrid: Cuisine as Cultural Melting Pot.” Using traveler’s accounts, memoirs, legal documents and edicts, plays, press sources, and the work of Benito Pérez Galdós and other literary figures, she traces the reaction, both

positive and negative, to the evolution in the retail infrastructure for prepared meals in nineteenth century Madrid. Simón Palmer also focuses on Italian chefs from the mid-eighteenth century onward in “driving the modernization of Spanish cuisine” (185) and business practices, and in operating new types of establishments featuring heated political debate, historic literary discussions, and significant culinary hybridization. Simón Palmer’s attention to the Italian influence in Spanish food history expands the work of historians whose focus on the foreign impact is limited to the French. Collectively, these three essays serve as particularly eloquent examples of the important contributions that twenty-first century interdisciplinary food studies approaches offer.

The contributions by Gregorio Saldarriaga Escobar, Adolfo Castañón, and Sergio Ramírez explore how specific concepts and practices have underpinned culinary syncretism on both regional and global levels. In “Taste and Taxonomy of Native Foods in Hispanic America: 1493-1640,” Saldarriaga Escobar examines how merchants, courtiers, sailors, and soldiers described the foods they encountered in the Americas. He argues that edible flora and fauna were only made suitable for global consumption through the transformative effect of cooking, through successful cultivation, and through their reframing within older and more familiar consumptive models. “In What the Palate Knows: Nicaragua’s Culinary Cultures,” Ramírez emphasizes hybridity in the construction of “traditional” cuisines, with indigenous, Spanish and African elements each clearly present. He also asserts that the process of blending and fusion was not introduced by the Spanish, but rather pre-dated contact with Europeans and characterized the Americas more broadly, a point that Castañón also makes with respect to Mexico, in referencing the work of J.M. Le Clézio. Indeed, Castañón’s “The Evolution of Mexican Cuisine: Five Gastronomical Seasons, Mole, Pozole, Tamal, Tortilla, and Chile Relleno” is arguably the most eloquent and interesting of all the essays in this volume. Relying on a wide variety of sources and embracing a broad periodization framework that extends from the pre-Columbian to the present, Castañón posits that “the long trajectory of Mexican cuisine” (248) originated in the vast markets of the sort that Cortés encountered in Tenochtitlán. The convergence of foods from across Mesoamerica, and the use of Nahuatl as a lingua franca, facilitated culinary syncretism long before the arrival of the Spanish. Castañón also emphasizes the agency of women, through networks of female sociability—and of the practice of oral transmission by women of culinary knowledge—in the creation of a codified Mexican national cuisine.

While edited volumes involve unique challenges in casting a narrative arc, this one does so surprisingly well. Arranged roughly in chronological order, four

of the five chapters on Spain are clustered in the middle of the book, with chapters eight through thirteen returning to Latin America. By closing with De Maeseneer's essay on Cuba, the reader's attention is refocused on the *gastrocritical* approach to literary analysis. Though there is some unevenness with respect to the balance between exposition of evidence and analysis of meaning in individual chapters, the essays collectively demonstrate the positive results that can come from interdisciplinarity methods and foci.

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