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Review of Natalia Silva Prada, Pasquines, cartas y enemigos: Cultura del lenguaje infamante en Nueva Granada y otros reinos americanos, siglos XVI y XVII

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Silva Prada, Natalia. *Pasquines, cartas y enemigos: Cultura del lenguaje infamante en Nueva Granada y otros reinos americanos, siglos XVI y XVII*. Bogotá: Editorial Universidad del Rosario, 2021. xxxvi + 283 pp. + 12 ill. + 3 appendices.

Natalia Silva Prada's thoroughly researched and stimulating book introduces readers to a "culture of infamous language" expressed in pasquinades, satirical writings, shouts, images, and gestures, mainly against authorities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in New Granada, which encompassed modern Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela. This infamous language belonged to a broader political culture of discourses, symbolic, and representative practices, which Renán Silva Olarte, in the book's prologue, calls Euro-American (xxiii). It was so because it derived from ancient Roman and Christian notions of fame and infamy, integrated into Castilian law and custom, which Spaniards brought to the New World. There was an important political dimension to these ideas. Reputation and honor were essential to authority in societies in which, as described by the sociologist Max Weber, legitimate power depended on personal bonds of allegiance. Just as colonial authorities relied on words, ceremonies, and gestures to project respect, compel obedience, and validate actions, the language of infamy could challenge those authorities and undermine their power in spectacular and violent ways.

Key to this culture of infamous language is the concept of *fama*. More than fame, in the sense of having prestige, *fama* was central to a person's legal standing. Without it, testimony might not have bearing in court. It guaranteed honors, titles, and privileges. Lacking it barred eligibility to professions and positions of authority. Government officials, clergy, judges, and military figures might have appropriate training and experience, but without good reputations their words and actions might not carry the necessary heft for others to accept them voluntarily. Only in exceptional cases were individuals of humble or rustic origins thought capable of securing the necessary respect from their social superiors. One's actions and comportment were essential to *fama*, but so was family background, which was beyond personal control. In Catholic Iberia, *buena fama* depended on having Old Christian "purity of blood," without which a person was suspected of harboring values contrary to God's will and hence dangerous to social order. These legal and political ramifications of *fama* informed the many different and often strange ways in which infamous language became a powerful political weapon.

The book's nine short chapters address three broad topics. The first two chapters outline key concepts drawn from cultural history essential to make sense of the political dimensions of infamous language. Besides *fama*, two other concepts elucidated by the history of emotions are especially relevant. Enmity

and passion were often cited by victims as motivation for attempting to destroy their reputations. Yet casting attacks as private vendettas sought to deflect attention away from political matters. Publicizing the grave crimes and scandalous vices of powerful figures sought as well the removal and punishment of those who were abusing their power for their personal interests rather than serving God or the crown. In this sense, although the means and style were radically different, defaming actions shared the same goal as letters to monarchs or the pope: to inform a higher authority about the abuses of tyrannical officials or corrupt clergy. As Silva Prada remarks, “it is often difficult to tell the limit between calumny and the defense of [broader] interests” (51). The overlap of the personal and the political was at the heart of early modern politics.

The second topic, and the heart of the book (chapters 3-6), is the variety of infamous writings. Graffiti, pasquinades, and libels provided anonymous means to denounce and defame powerful men. Rather than straightforward accounts of misdeeds, infamous writings resorted to satire, symbolism, or verse to add insult to injury. Mimicking what Michèle Fogel has called “ceremonies of information,” writings posted on church doors and walls broadcast misdeeds and shame instead of official edicts and proclamations.¹ Political defamation too resorted to the theatricality of the ceremonies of information. Silva Prada cites a poet named Bejarano who composed satirical verses to denounce the evils of the Audiencia of Santo Domingo. To avoid recognition of his handwriting, he composed it with letters cut from printed texts, wrapped them in a palm leaf, and had them delivered by a Black man posing as a cheese seller, who sold the poisonous poem to the wife of the audiencia’s president.

The book’s remaining three chapters turn their attention to the topic of unwritten forms of defamation. Authors of defamations appropriated *sambenitos*, the Inquisition’s symbol to brand heretics, to ruin reputations with the stain of impure Jewish blood. Hurling insults or stones, defacing doors with ink, leaving horns in houses, singing insulting verses, and making loud noises with cowbells, as in a charivari, appropriately called a *cencerrada*: these were some of the many ways of slighting a person’s honor. The appendix section contains a glossary of infamous terms and expressions that catalogs perversely inventive forms of defamation ranging from the playful subversions of carnival to dehumanizing violence. The last chapter on heinous crimes relates a gruesome murder committed in 1580 by the Audiencia of Bogotá judge Luis Cortés de Mesa of his servant Juan de los Ríos for allegedly telling authorities they had engaged in sodomy. Ríos’s corpse was found in a bog with its tongue, ears, and genitals missing. The ensuing investigation revealed that, after the murder, Cortés went

¹ Michèle Fogel, *Les cérémonies de l’information dans la France du XVI^e au milieu du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

home with his friend and accomplice Cristóbal Escobar and told his wife: “Embrace *señor* Escobedo, who is our father and our brother who has restored honor to you and me,” and pointing to Escobedo’s handbag added: “look at the tongue that insulted you, and his ears and shameful parts, [which] *señor* Escobedo is carrying there” (203). For this crime Cortés was beheaded and Escobedo hanged.

How many of these types of actions took place is impossible to tell. Silva Prada thinks that they were not uncommon, although finding archival evidence is hard. Authorities dismissed cases involving individuals not deemed worthy of honor. But actions attempted against high office—as was the case with viceroys, governors, judges, bishops, and inquisitors—or the authority of the crown and the church were thoroughly investigated, and culprits punished severely. Occasionally, scandal brought the dismissal of powerful figures. As this absorbing study makes clear: infamous language is important to make sense of the nature of politics and the workings of power in the early modern world.

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