Panel: Assessing the Americas: Revising Visions of the Atlantic World

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Title: “Imperialist Texts: An Oversimplification of 19th Century Latin American Travel Literature”
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Abstract

During the nineteenth century, foreign travelers often noted the rich, natural resources available in Latin America that could be used back in their home country. Frequently, accounts explicitly referenced how connections to Latin America would be beneficial; these features in their accounts reflected an imperialist attitude towards Latin America. In Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, Mary Louise Pratt argued that travelers during this time wrote travel literature that viewed Latin America through biased eyes in order to exploit Latin America to advance their home country’s economy. Labeling 19th century travel writers Imperialists oversimplifies things. The purpose of this project was to examine foreign travel literature and travelers’ motivations for exploring Latin America. This project used contemporary travel literature, as well as scholarly secondary sources on the travel literature during this era. Two themes emerged from these writings: collaboration efforts and descriptions.

Scientific-explorers such as Alexander von Humboldt and John Ball collaborated with native informants to gain information on Latin America, such as barometric measurements. Other scientific-explorers like Sir Richard Henry Bonnycastle and William Walton used positive descriptions to portray the marvels of Latin America and its people. For instance, Walton praised Latin Americans for their competency in astronomy, botany, and chemistry, stating that because of their perception and skills, they were unquestioningly capable of attending universities in Europe. Based on these examples, this paper argues that advancing the scientific knowledge of the natural world rather than advancing an imperialist agenda, motivated some travelers to explore Latin America. The collaborations and positive descriptions examined in this paper do not fit into the imperialist interpretation on travel literature, which emphasizes not only travel writers’ negative
depictions of natives, but also foreigners’ reluctance to collaborate with locals. By showing that some scientific travelers collaborated with locals in the quest of advancing knowledge about the natural world, this study revises Pratt’s assertion that it was imperialism that motivated travelers to explore Latin America.

Bibliographical Note

This project used a combination of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources focused on foreign travelers’ accounts of Latin America. These accounts included descriptions on the natural resources, collaboration efforts with the native population, and depictions of the native populations. Additionally, in some of the primary sources, the authors noted their motivations for exploring Latin America. The secondary sources provided context for this project. For instance, Mary Louise Pratt’s book, *Imperial Eyes*, was used in this project to help demonstrate the need for a revisionist interpretation on the traditional narrative regarding scientific-explorer to Latin America. Several of the secondary sources provided information on writing travel literature in the nineteenth century. In addition, other secondary sources provided context for Latin American travel writing as well as on scientific travel writing more broadly.