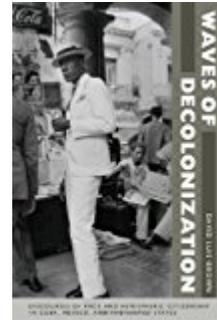


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Luis-Brown. *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. ix + 340 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4365-3; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4366-0.

Reviewed by Lorrin Thomas (Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey)  
Published on H-LatAm (March, 2013)  
Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo



## Against A U.S.-Dominated Modernity

In *Waves of Decolonization*, David Luis-Brown weaves together an impressive array of texts and ideas within a framework central to understanding the history of the Americas in the early twentieth century. Luis-Brown links many voices of dissent in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States, tracing how they challenged the reigning imperialist and racist ideologies of the era and reasserted denied rights “on a hemispheric scale” (p. 20). Progressing chronologically, each of the book’s four chapters highlights the work of a handful of writer-activists whose fiction or essays explore a distinct set of problems arising from a new U.S.-dominated modernity. In response, Luis-Brown argues, critics and intellectuals crafted a heterogeneous but coherent set of demands for what he calls “hemispheric citizenship” (p. 19).

Citing inspiration by literature scholar Mary Louise Pratt, Luis-Brown constructs both a chronology and genealogy of his various authors’ critiques of formal and informal colonization, asserting that they comprise series of interlocking “waves of decolonization” (pp. 4-5). His argument—that these “waves” produced, together, a re-visioning of social inclusion and political status: a new concept of “hemispheric citizenship”—is a convincing one. In laying out the basis of hemispheric citizenship, Luis-Brown leans on Hannah Arendt’s idea that people become “half stateless” in contexts wherein “an

imperial state usurps another country’s sovereignty”; he demonstrates throughout the book the many ways in which writer-activists around the Americas made essentially the same claim (p. 20).

Luis-Brown credits the work of W. E. B Du Bois as the animating spark of his own ideas, particularly Du Bois’s explorations of the “global color line” by 1900 (although Luis-Brown begins his analysis earlier, with 1880s novels that treat constructions of whiteness in California after the Mexican-American war—a boon to historians seeking the *longue durée*). Luis-Brown structures the book around the “restless universalisms” (p. 11) employed by a variety of intellectuals in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States—José Martí, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Manuel Gamio, Franz Boas, Zora Neale Hurston, and José Vasconcelos among them—in their critiques of the imperialist status quo.

In linking the ideas of this diverse group of critics, Luis-Brown charts terrain important to both U.S. and Latin American historians working to denationalize the histories of this period and to chart the border crossings of its cosmopolitan ideas. The many levels of connection among the writers who comprise Luis-Brown’s subjects—and their criss-crossing influences and anxieties—provide the historian with an intricate ideo-

logical map (and an excellent bibliography) of decolonization debates between the late nineteenth century and the Great Depression. Although his discipline is literature, Luis-Brown succeeds at constructing a chronology of anti-imperialist and antiracist critiques that is invaluable to historians of this period.

The book's last two chapters in particular offer gems of historical connection and intellectual collaboration that are rarely included in more conventional historical narratives. Luis-Brown treats the idea of primitivism, for instance, as a problematic that connects the shared limitations and aspirations of Mexico's *indigenismo*, Cuba's *negrismo*, and Harlem's New Negro. People as well as concepts illustrate the era's transnational crosscurrents. In just one of many such anecdotes, Luis-Brown explains that Langston Hughes first became familiar with parallels between Mexican and U.S. racism while visiting his father, who lived in Mexico City, in 1919.

Other parts of the book offer additional inversions and surprises: the Cuban nationalist José Martí is situated as a notable figure in the U.S. literary world of his time (p. 37); James Weldon Johnson, author of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," is remembered not just for writing the United States' Negro national anthem, but for celebrating Teddy Roosevelt's "big stick" approach to Latin America in song (p. 173); Manuel Gamio's U.S. colleague Zora Neale Hurston, lauded for her insistence on black culture's power to resist domination, is also criticized for her support of the U.S. occupation of Haiti (p. 236). Moments like this in the book convince the reader of the truly hemispheric scope of these intellectuals' politics and work. They also provide the armature for Luis-Brown's argument for a nascent hemispheric citizenship, fleshed out by writers and critics who grappled with the

various problems of exclusion, hierarchy, and social violence that linked their societies under the repressive force of U.S. imperialism and capitalist expansion.

*Waves of Decolonization* could be used effectively for a history graduate seminar, but is too complex and dense for undergraduates. At its best, the book reads for historians much like Doris Somer's *Foundational Fictions* (1993): a close study of a range of familiar and unfamiliar texts, situated carefully in a nuanced ideological and historical landscape. In other moments, though, the book's weaknesses may be distracting. In the first two chapters in particular, the author's analysis of literary form (sentimentalism, romantic racialism) becomes unwieldy and repetitive at points, causing him to lose the forest for the trees. Another failure of balance in the book involves the introduction of major concepts—Michel Foucault's idea of "biopower," for instance, or the "chronotope" of decolonization, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's "figure of the interrelations of space and time"—which the author discusses in some detail, as ideas that appear to be central to the book's overall arguments, but then fails to return to in subsequent chapters or discuss in the book's conclusion.

On balance, though, *Waves of Decolonization* represents an important contribution to the scholarly literature on the twentieth-century Americas. Luis-Brown's argument about the formulation of a hemispheric citizenship is original and important, and will surely be debated and expanded in future work by other scholars writing about transnational politics in the Americas. The book provides welcome new perspective to a growing field, joining the excellent work of Winston James, Frank Guridy, Paul Gilroy, Penny Von Eschen, and Laura Lomas to add further dimension to our understandings of cosmopolitan responses to imperialism.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

**Citation:** Lorrin Thomas. Review of Luis-Brown, David, *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31919>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.