



Karen Melvin, Sylvia Sellers-García, eds.. *Imagining Histories of Colonial Latin America: Synoptic Methods and Practices*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2017. 304 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8263-5922-3.

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History writing involves numerous decisions, paths taken and abandoned, and unexpected and fortuitous encounters. However, historians often reveal little of these choices and contingencies in their carefully plotted narratives, leaving those who want to write history with few examples as to how to proceed. This observation by Inga Clendinnen is the focus of *Imagining Histories of Colonial Latin America*, the latest volume in the Religions of the Americans Series from the University of New Mexico Press, edited by Karen Melvin and Sylvia Sellers-García. Melvin, a professor of history at Bates College, and Sellers-García, an associate professor of history at Boston College, invited a group of scholars of colonial Latin America to scrutinize their work and to make visible the “ropes,” “the safety net,” and “the rickety structure in the background” (p. 2) that typically go unnoted. The sixteen short, well-written essays that are the result of this effort provide a rich variety of methodological and practical reflections intended to sharpen the reader’s understanding of past human experience in all of its paradoxes, uncertainties, and silences.

Inspired by William B. Taylor’s conception of “historical study as a restless kind of discipline of context” (p. xv), Melvin and Sellers-García offer readers an alternative learning experience on two

distinct levels. First, they ask them to assume a self-reflective attitude toward their own work and ask themselves what influences shape the ways in which they approach the past and write history. How do source and method meet in their work? What is the nature of the investigative paths they follow? These and other questions take the reader on a sustained and continuous study of methodology. Second, through their book they offer a valuable example of the usefulness of a synoptic approach to the study of the past. Rather than limiting themselves to a single method, they emphasize the importance of deploying multiple methods and adding to the pooled resources of the collective field to generate new perspectives and practices.

In relation to these two learning objectives, the editors have organized their book not by content, source, or historiographical “turn,” but rather around different phases of the research and writing process. Part 1 discusses different ways of approaching research topics and the type of questions that historians may ask. The four chapters included in this section explore the quest for context and the creative imagination required in the process, as well as the role of dichotomies, geography, and theory in the framing of research questions. Part 2 considers the different ways of

grappling with sources and their possible meanings. The four chapters included in this section reflect upon the ways in which textual and material sources can be interpreted by embedding them in different contexts. They discuss the significance of synoptic thinking for making audible muffled and subaltern voices, for working with a diffuse documentation, and for understanding the shifting meaning of objects in diverse but overlapping contexts. In part 3, the attention shifts toward the process of transforming questions and time spent with the sources into interpretative histories. These three chapters ponder how to cope with change and continuity in historical narratives and how to imagine stories from various points of view to foreground marginal voices, and offer specific suggestions on how to develop different writing styles while targeting different audiences.

In each section, the reader will find three types of chapters. The first type are those written by the editors themselves. These most resemble a “how-to” approach toward asking questions and writing history for different audiences. Written in a colloquial style, these chapters are primarily of interest to undergraduate and graduate students and, to a lesser extent, early-career scholars seeking concrete advice. The second type encompasses those chapters in which the author takes a reflexive stance toward their own work and rely on personal experience to analyze their own engagement with different kinds of source material. The chapters by Ivonne del Valle and Jessica Delgado, for example, draw on concrete examples to provide instructive insights into the creative and reflexive processes that historical interpretation involves. Finally, the third type of chapter includes more conventional studies. Sean F. McEnroe’s chapter, for instance, illustrates how to study an object like the Virgin of Copacabana through the perspective of her first biographer, but leaves out the personal and reflective voice that is present in other chapters. Such an eclectic mix of styles and approaches is a welcome achievement that not only underlines the volume’s argument about the

significance of synoptic approaches to research and writing history, but also contributes to diversifying its target audiences. This mixture produces a dynamic text for those reading the volume in its entirety, while offering single chapters for a variety of uses in the classroom.

Further adding to its value for teaching purposes is the volume’s fourth and final part. This part revolves around a single source: Fray Agustín de Quintana’s *Advertencias para los nuevos confesores*, a text that is included in English translation in chapter 17. After an introduction by Matthew D. O’Hara, Seth Kimmel, Jennifer Scheper Hughes, Sean F. McEnroe, and Paul Ramírez each offer, from their own vantage point, their reading of this late eighteenth-century confession manual. Kimmel reads the *Advertencias* from the perspective of literary criticism; Scheper Hughes does so as a scholar working in religious studies; and McEnroe and Ramírez deploy methods belonging to the fields of social and cultural history. As O’Hara explains in his introduction, such an “exercise in simultaneous reading offers us a seat next to the researcher,” providing an “opportunity to examine the research process itself” (p. 188). Revealing the workings of the field of history on a small scale, part 4 is particularly useful for teaching students, demonstrating how a single source can be questioned and approached from diverging perspectives, leading to various histories. Despite the obvious value of such an exercise, it should be noted that voices from the region itself have not been included. Precisely when teaching about different perspectives, it seems important to emphasize the role of place and tradition in the writing of history as well. As it is, and this observation could be made for the book as a whole, the difference that the editors create is a safe one, the dialogue being one between scholars trained largely in similar scholarly environments.

Such an observation by no means diminishes the achievements of this book. *Imagining Histories of Colonial Latin America* is a highly accessi-

ble work that offers a rich and variegated view on the distinct dimensions of the processes of historical interpretation and history writing. Presenting plenty of material for reflection and discussion, the book can be of interest to experienced and early-career scholars of colonial Latin American history, as well as to graduate students seeking practical examples of how to approach their own studies of the history of this region.

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