

Sample Book Review & Commentary

Read the provided draft of a book review targeted for an interdisciplinary journal. Note things you like and areas that require improvement or things you would do differently. Pay special attention to compliments or criticisms as well as what elements of the elements of the book the author discusses. Following the review, you will find a breakdown of the review's strengths and areas for improvement as well as general recommendations for structuring a review.

Targeted publication: *Latino Studies*

The Latino Body: Crisis Identities in American Literary and Cultural Memory

Lázaro Lima

New York University Press, New York and London, 2007

The Latino Body: Crisis Identities in American Literary and Cultural Memory by Lázaro Lima (Associate Professor of Spanish and Latino Studies, Bryn Mawr College) is a valuable contribution to the still-emerging field of Latino/a cultural and literary studies. Lima charts the configuration of the Latino body by the state and the subsequent alteration of the state by the expression of Latino subjectivity in cultural production, a dialectic he names the “becoming historical” of the Latino body. Lima’s historiographic project employs feminist and queer theories to engage a broad selection of literary, historical, and popular texts, tracing how the “Latino body has been imagined, dismembered, and reimagined anew” (p. 9). Ambitious in scope, Lima’s theorization of the U.S. Latino/a body politic will be of great value to scholars invested in Latino/a subject formation working in literary, cultural, visual art, and performance studies disciplines.

The text is divided in two parts, “Longing History” and “Postmodern Genealogies: The Latino Body, in Theory.” In “Longing History,” Lima “attempts to recover a literary and cultural historiography of Latino intervention in American cultural history from the mid-nineteenth century to the rise of the equality-rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s” through the identification of texts that highlight moments of Latino bodily crisis (p. 15). In the first chapter, Lima analyzes Mexican American negotiations of citizenship and national belonging in the post Mexican American War years in two testimonial narratives, Eulalia Pérez’s *An Old Woman and Her Recollections* (1877) and Catarina Ávila de Río’s *Memoirs of Doña Catarina Ávila de Ríos*. These texts are read alongside María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s historical romance *The Squatter and the Don* (1885). Lima deftly reads the ways in which these texts strategically re-member history – and by extension the Latino/a body – to both cohere to *and* destabilize dominant national narratives. Lima’s reading of Eulalia Pérez’s testimony, the mythologized “oldest woman in the world,” is particularly strong. Via a discussion of Roland Barthes’ approach to photography in *Camera Lucida*, Lima lucidly argues that the positioning of Pérez’s photographic image within her testimonial both contributed to the construction of the text’s historical authenticity and also became a founding visual image of Mexican American ethnicity. Reading *The Squatter and the Don* as both a foundational fiction and testimonial in and of itself, Lima



presents a compelling and theoretically sophisticated argument for all three of these texts as historical reenactments that write strategic relationships to the nation.

Chapter Two identifies the equality movements of the 1960s as the second moment of crisis for the Latino/a body. In this chapter Lima analyzes one of the most important texts to emerge from the Chicano rights movement, Tomás Rivera's *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971). Lima argues that Rivera's novel posits the Chicano body as the *corpus delicti* (body of evidence) of the crimes waged against it by histories of disenfranchisement. Lima provides a carefully historicized reading of this text's location in a larger context of Chicano writing in order to situate the historical currency of the tropes of land and religiosity employed by the novel as sites for negotiating Latino subjectivity. Notably, in this chapter Lima's analysis is heavily invested in the language of performance and theatricality. He understands Rivera's text as a "staging" and "reenactment" of the "scene" of the cultural crime of the Mexican American body's excision from the U.S. body politic. While a discourse of performance embodies Lima's largely textual understanding of the body politic, an engagement with performance tropes also opens up this work beyond literary studies by gesturing toward a potentially rich dialogue with theater and performance studies' theorizations of the performativity of nation and citizenship.

Part II of the text, "Postmodern Genealogies: The Latino Body, in Theory," moves from a historiographic recovery of Latino/a literary production following the Mexican American War and during the Chicano rights movement to a two-fold charting of Latino literature following the identity projects of the 1960s. First, Lima maps the institutionalization of Latino/a literature as a project that necessitated the development of methodological frameworks capable of recovering Latino/a writing prior to the 1960s. Secondly, Lima argues that the institutionalization of Latino literature demands an investigation of the ways in which sexuality informs national conceptions of citizenship and personhood in Latino literary production.

In Chapter Three, Lima fleshes out the politics of Latino Studies' heralding of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Castaways* as the foundational site for articulating Latino subjectivity. In this chapter, Lima introduces his first explicit theorization of the "body politic" as a formation wherein bodily materiality lines up with culturally inflected signification. While Lima's rehearsal of contemporary theories of the body at this point in the text is consistent with the historiographic frame of the project and certainly produces a fruitful conception of the body politic as it will be applied to Cabeza de Vaca, the earlier chapters of the text would be well served by this broader theorization of the body politic. Through a close reading of the way Cabeza de Vaca rhetorically "imbues his body with meaning by relating what his body endured in America," Lima's treatment of *Castaways* theorizes the body politic as a complex collision of matter, cultural meaning, and national space (p. 105). Programmatically engaging the existing criticism on *Castaways*, Lima convincingly demonstrates the limits of a multicultural figuring of Cabeza de Vaca as the Chicano or Latino forefather.

The final chapter of Lima's text engages a selection of contemporary Latino writing, including Luz María Umpierre's *Margarita Poems* (1987), Elías Miguel Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance* (1991), and Rafael Campo's *What the Body Told* (1996). The conclusion of the text, "Democracy's Graveyard: Dead Citizenship and the Latino Body," extends his investigation of



contemporary Latino writing to a consideration of Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005). In the work on contemporary Latino literature, Lima examines how these texts negotiate "contradictions inherent to Latino ethnic identities," specifically gender and sexuality (p. 19). Subsequently, the final chapter and the conclusion engage the widest sampling of contemporary queer and feminist theory and gesture back to the work on Tomás Rivera's novel in their investigation of the body – often the body in pain – as a battleground of meaning for Latino subjectivity. Here Lima's language once again takes a turn toward performance through a sustained engagement with Butlerian performativity and the "spectacle" of the body in pain. In this final chapter, Lima lucidly argues for the ways in which contemporary Latino writers present resistant representations of the U.S. Latino/a body that "refute the social symbolic ideals of citizenship and national belonging that govern bodies and mark them as legible and legitimate within the confines of the National Symbolic" (p. 162).

The Latino Body is a notable contribution to the field and will serve Latino/a Studies scholars across disciplines invested in cultural production and identity formation. In this study Lima presents both refreshing reconsiderations of widely circulated historical and literary texts and rigorously engages texts that have received relatively little scholarly attention. While the majority of Lima's scholarship adheres fairly strictly to cultural and literary studies methodologies, the flirtation with tropes of performance as a method for thinking through the body expands the resonance of Lima's text beyond the field of literature. However, the text would have benefited from the inclusion of actual theater and performance practices alongside the genres that Lima privileges.

Review Exercise Breakdown

Positives:

- Identifies the main argument of the text, defines its key terms, and states the authors interventions
- Names the fields with which the text is in conversation and to which it will contribute
- States the study's methods (historical, close reading) and theoretical approaches (feminist, gender, ethic studies)
- Offers one example of constructive critique (identifies a key theoretical discussion on the body that could have come sooner in the text)

Areas for improvement:

- The structure of the review too closely mirrors the structure of the book. It is not necessary to reiterate the title of each chapter and attempt to name as many specifics as possible; focus instead on the main argument of the chapter and how it connects to the text's larger project
- Chapter summaries focus too heavily on description and do not substantiate critical appraisals (e.g. "Lima's reading of Eulalia Pérez's testimony, the mythologized "oldest woman in the world," is particularly strong." pg. 2)
- In several instances, quotations end paragraphs and are there to simply supply information that could have been paraphrased (e.g. first paragraph, pg. 4)
- The one major critique (which asks the author to do something out of the purview of his text) is poorly positioned at the end of the review
- Focus on performance/theatricality throughout the review and in closing critique suggest disciplinary bias of reviewer
- Language tends toward jargon. While the target audience of the journal is humanities/humanistic social sciences, shorthand should be avoided (e.g. Butlerian). Passive voice should be replaced with active verbs and complex sentences broken into shorter, more succinct phrases. Remember, reviews tend not to be as rigorously copy edited as articles.

Example:

Original: Lima provides a carefully historicized reading of this text's location in a larger context of Chicano writing in order to situate the historical currency of the tropes of land and religiosity employed by the novel as sites for negotiating Latino subjectivity.

Possible re-write: Lima's reading historicizes the text's depictions of land and religiosity as part of broader trends in Chicano literature. Here and in other works, they function as tropes for negotiating Latino subjectivity.



Basic Book Review Structure Recommendations:

- 1) Introduce the book's argument, interventions, key terms, and overall value. This is where authors generally signal the disciplinary fields books cross and any theoretical conversations with which they engage
- 2) Summarize each chapter in order—include chapter numbers but not titles. Avoid dedicating a paragraph to each chapter (depending on word count, this could take anywhere between 1 and 3 paragraphs).
- 3) Evaluate the book's strengths/contributions
- 4) Provide constructive criticism of weaknesses
- 5) Conclude with an overall assessment of the book

