

# Sentimentality reloaded. Reconsiderations of romantic sentimentality in nineteenth-century Bolivia today.

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Reseña/Review: Leonardo García Pabón. *El cuento sentimental romántico en Bolivia (siglo XIX)*. La Paz: Plural Editores, 2017. 457 pp.

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**G**arcía Pabón's volume anthologizes six stories originally published in serialized form in different Bolivian periodicals throughout the nineteenth century. Except for Bartolomé Mitre's "Soledad," which has received a significant amount of scholarly interest in Latin America, the rest of the stories

in this compilation have been mostly ignored or neglected by literary critics. Reproducing mostly first editions (except when later editions proved to be more authoritative and complete), García Pabón includes the following texts: “Soledad” by Bartolomé Mitre (1847); “La isla” by Manuel María Caballero (1864); “El Templo y la Zafra” by Félix Reyes Ortiz (1864); “Crimen y expiación” by Sebastián Dalence (1864); “Misterios del corazón” by Mariano Ricardo Terrazas (1869); and “Corazón enfermo. Diario de una costurera” by Isaac G. Eduardo (1891). Though this is by no means a complete list of all sentimental romantic short stories in Bolivia, in his prologue, García Pabón considers his selection a good sampling of the possibilities and promises afforded by the genre. Because it offers modernized versions of the stories, the volume is an invaluable pedagogical tool for all those who teach cultural aspects of the nineteenth century in Latin America, as it offers modernized versions of the stories, as well as a renewed opportunity to bring into scholarly circles the discussion of the value of sentimental literature in the context of nineteenth-century Latin America.

Among nineteenth-century scholars, the nature and status of sentimentality is widely contested. Most critics tend to agree that the adjective “sentimental” is technically applied to works that have a primary appeal to the emotions and operate by means of affect. Sentimental literature is interested in the experience, display, effect, and interpretation of emotion and in stirring up emotion in readers. Nevertheless, the literature and culture of sentimentality has been viewed, in less academically inclined circles, as clichéd, predictable and of limited aesthetic and social value. Even before Oscar Wilde proclaimed that a sentimentalist is “one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it,” sentimentality operated as a synonym of excessive, contrived, and possessing a kind of sham pathos. Even as late as 2010, in *Spoilt Rotten: the Toxic Cult of Sentimentality*, Theodor Dalrymple extolled the harmful consequences of the cultural entrenchment

of sentimentality and illustrated how an attitude of what he deemed the “danger of abandoning logic in favor of sentimentality,” was childish and reductive of our humanity.

Sentimentalism as a cultural practice, however, was founded on the belief that through the power of imagination it was possible to understand someone else’s feelings and that this understanding was the foundation for the constitution of communal bonds. The pedagogical imperative implicit in eighteenth-century sentimental codes dictates the cultivation of readers’ sympathy in order to achieve two distinct goals: first, as a precondition to action that alleviates suffering in the face of misery and results in the satisfaction derived from a perceived self-improvement; second, as a means to reinforce social bonds that would ultimately contribute towards the building of a national identity. Sympathizing with the protagonist’s sufferings, the reader enters into a community with them. Diderot, for example, placed the sentimental community of reader and text on a continuum with a community of sympathetic readers. Rather than simply crying together, readers of sentimental novels engage in conflict and specifically in a conflict whose terms resemble those at stake in their own lives, experiencing the collision between individual freedom and collective welfare in the aesthetic sphere. The constitution of a community is crucial to sentimental consolation. However, this community does not represent a private refuge from public life, but it rather exemplifies the liberal public sphere where unity takes the form of debate and conflict. The production of a “diversity of judgment” –as Diderot puts it– fosters the development of democratic ideals and strengthens the potential for political power. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith characterizes the feeling of moral sentiment as the feeling with the passion of other which operated through a logic of mirroring, in which a spectator imaginatively reconstructed the experience of the person he watches.

In the past couple of decades, there has been a concerted critical effort to rehabilitate the sentimental tradition and to argue for the inclusion of sentimental works in the canon (Ana Peluffo, Beatriz Sarlo, Ramiro Zó, Fernando Unzueta, Doris Sommer, María Fernanda Lander, among others). Furthermore, these recent cultural productions recuperate sentimentality from the point of view of sensibility –including medical and physiological studies, literature of the senses, and of emotion–, where most of these perspectives can be encompassed under the general heading of affect theory. This volume can be counted among those renewed efforts, for example in moments when García Pabón highlights the most reformist political uses of sentimental writings, which also contributed with the formation of an emerging bourgeois consciousness.

Echoes of French writers—Lamartine, Saint Pierre, Victor Hugo, Chateaubriand, Rousseau—permeate in the Latin American narratives gathered here. But García Pabón steers clear of more conventional admonishments that characterize these texts as lackluster copies, highlighting that the value of his selection resides in that the texts do not reproduce the same pedagogical sentimentality of their European counterparts. They differ greatly –he claims– in their didactic purpose, which in the case of European sentimentality is linked to a structure of colonization, easily observable through the foundation of utopian spaces in the margins of Europe (Italy, Africa, etc.), as well as the images that return a distorted mirror of the native-other as either feminized and “noble savage,” or depraved barbarian. In Pabón’s anthology, the sentimental education makes an attempt at decolonizing, while most of the conflicts are presented in relation with customs, decrees, traditional regulations of communities, and the severity of the rules of government. Misfortunes are not only identified with tears but with the oppressed as a social group, with social difference represented as a relation of power. The protagonist suffers because she or he occupies a dominated social position. Underscoring the

problem of an atomized social body across gender, class, and racial divides, these texts represent their protagonists (women in particular) as abused by virtue of their belonging to an oppressed social group. So the invocation of a sympathetic community comes as a response to unequal deeply rooted social divisions within the frame of coloniality.

In *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Margaret Cohen posits realism's successful erasure of its sentimental origins. Along similar lines, by reconstructing a key formative period in Bolivian narrative, García Pabón hints towards ways in which realist codes emerged in a "hostile takeover" of a prestigious contemporary sentimental practice, reconfiguring the emergence of realism as a displacement and subsumption of sentimental codes.

A pleasant surprise in this anthology was the inclusion of the well-known *Soledad* by Argentine Bartolomé Mitre. By including it, García Pabón is undoing traditional understandings of foundational national narratives in terms of authorial origin by considering the mobility and migration patterns of intellectuals throughout the nineteenth-century as well as the permeability, distribution, and circulation of texts, an unavoidable task in order to reconfigure maps of national attributions and claims of belonging. Furthermore, one of the most productive interventions for future scholarship in García Pabón's reading is when he posits sentimentality as an allegory of failure of the national project in the context of Bolivian cultural production. Scott Fitzgerald wrote about the contrast between sentimentalists and romantics as the difference between the person who thinks things will last (the sentimental), and the person who has a desperate confidence that they won't. So perhaps there is more to be said, from the point of view of a category that crosses the romantic with the sentimental, about the clash of temporal expectations in the constitution of the failure of a national project.

Finally, in considering the rest of the anthology, one must admit that García Pabón bridges a tradition of perpetual conflict between the canon and

the archive in nineteenth-century literary scholarship. Originally published in installments, in scattered broadsides, and periodicals, this so-called “minor literature” finds a home in Pabón’s organizational and conceptual logic. By doing this, Pabón is contributing to the undoing of the neglect and condemnation to oblivion of this cultural production on the bases of outmoded notions of “literary” value or taste, derived themselves from a dichotomic understanding of economic value and literary value, crafted in the twilight years of the nineteenth-century. Reading these texts today will surprise the casual reader as well as reward the literary scholar, as it is possible to find incredible gems scattered through the pages, like the astounding necrophiliac scene that appears as a highlight in “Corazón enfermo.”

Now for all its bad rap, the culture of sentimentality is far from a distant and antiquated mode of engagement; we are its heirs and are still contending with its legacy. One may look no further than the ubiquitous #allthefeels in social media, the obsession with emojis and like buttons and can only imagine what future scholars will make of it. There are some flagrant exclusions among these pages, as one is bound to notice the lack of stories by women writers, for example. But as García Pabón points out, this is just a small sampling and the labor of bringing these kinds of texts to an accessible edition for the wider audience and the literary scholars’ libraries alike has just begun.