

NINETEENTH-CENTURY

Spanish America

A Cultural History



Christopher Conway

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For Desirée Henderson

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*Te estoy buscando América y temo no encontrarte,
tus pasos se han perdido entre la oscuridad . . .*

*(I'm searching for you America and I fear I won't find you,
your steps have been lost in the dark . . .)*

—RUBÉN BLADES

INTRODUCTION



Cultures

IN OCTOBER 1841, Brantz Mayer, a thirty-two-year-old lawyer from Baltimore, Maryland, arrived in Mexico City to take his post as secretary to the US legation in Mexico.¹ His hotel, the Gran Sociedad (Grand Society) was on the corner of Espíritu Santo and Refugio Streets, two blocks from the main plaza. Like other colonial structures on the block, the hotel was a two-story building with a spacious interior patio. Inside was a café that served snacks, ice cream, and liquor, and a fancy dining room that offered French meals twice a day. On the second floor there was a gaming room with billiards and card tables. The hotel was aptly named because it was frequented by the *crème de la crème* of Mexican society. On theater nights, couples dropped by the café for refreshments, and in the afternoons and evenings men of leisure filled the gaming room with their cigar smoke as they played cards.

After checking in, the eager traveler exited the Grand Society to take a walk and explore. As he wandered down the street, enveloped by the hubbub of city life, Mayer tipped his hat to the upper-class women, who wore expensive gowns and sported small, delicately embroidered pieces of fabric over their heads. He observed women of lesser means—clad in unadorned petticoats and plain dresses, and wearing colored shawls called *rebozos*—walking alongside barefoot Indians in misshapen, soft hats and torn clothes. Horse-drawn coaches rolled down the cobblestone street as groups of people crossed the thoroughfare.

Not far from the hotel, on Tacuba Street, Mayer sauntered along a row of street stalls that sold produce, drinks, and religious items. One shop in particular, a butcher's stall, caught his eye: it was built out of four

large boards, and had large cuts of beef hanging from the ceiling, garlands of linked sausage streaming across the boards, and a fierce-looking live rooster tied to the front counter. On the back wall of the structure was a cheaply printed image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who had miraculously revealed herself to the Mexican peasant Juan Diego in 1531, and who had been the spiritual counsel and comfort of the Mexican people ever since. The dark, curly-haired butcher in his bloody leather apron was laughing as he spoke to the women in *rebozos* at his counter. He took out a small guitar and began to sing, making his customers laugh, but Mayer was too far away to understand the words. He pulled his pocket watch from his vest and realized he should get back to the Café de la Gran Sociedad for his appointment with other members of the US legation. He turned away from the butcher's stall and walked back up the street, pausing once again to tip his hat to another lady of distinction, and trying to ignore the pleading children in rags at his heels.²

I describe scenes from Brantz Mayer's arrival in Mexico City to use them as a metaphor for the subject matter of this book. Only a few blocks from his hotel, Mayer had encountered the rich and contrasting tapestry of mid-nineteenth-century Mexico, where different classes of people crossed paths and rubbed shoulders. He saw the accoutrements and spaces of privilege at the aptly named Grand Society and caught a fleeting glimpse of how the humbler classes lived and moved around the city. In light of these dramatic contrasts, limited to a few blocks of Mexico City in 1841, the idea of summarizing and interpreting nineteenth-century Mexican culture, to say nothing of Spanish American culture in general, seems impossible. After all, culture is everywhere around living people, in the organization of space, in variations of language, in pastimes and belief systems, and much more. Culture's vast scope, variability, and changeable nature make it resistant to faithful re-creation, even if it had somehow been preserved in its entirety and undistorted in the historical record. And yet the contrast between the Grand Society and the butcher's stall on Tacuba Street is a useful starting point for telling the story of nineteenth-century Spanish American culture. The coexistence of a culture of refinement and privilege with a culture of the street provides us with a framework for thinking about culture in a dynamic and complex way.

This book explores the cultural forms that encapsulated the worldviews, lifestyles, and ideologies of Spanish American elites and commoners in the nineteenth century. By "cultural forms" I mean artifacts

of human creation that are associated with both the fine arts and popular culture. The fine arts encompass literature, theater, music, dance, and painting, all of which have been associated with refinement and exclusivity in the modern Western world. Popular counterparts to these kinds of art forms—sensationalist novels and crime stories, neighborhood musicians, fandango dancers, and circus and other street entertainments—are generally accessible to more people because they are not tied to financial privilege or restricted to one class of people alone. The chapters that follow tell the story of both these kinds of culture: they tell the story of the literary tastes and reading habits of elites, the popularity of cockfights and street entertainments among commoners, and the ways that different classes of people viewed each other through cultural expression. This book examines trends and patterns in the production of cultural objects and explores the networks, institutions, and belief systems that framed and gave meaning to cultural creation.

At its simplest, the argument here is that nineteenth-century Spanish American culture was forged through the opposition and intertwining of tradition and modernity. Republican statesmen, journalists, and writers used the idea of culture as an instrument to shape attitudes and promote social stability. Writing novels and plays, going to the theater, and enjoying classical music showed that a society was developing and improving itself. Cultural elites did not tire of promoting these activities, producing a vast body of print that celebrated culture's regenerative powers, although they did little to include the majority of the people in their cultural communities. Indeed, elite pastimes were not an option for the majority of people because they were expensive and required forms of cultural literacy that were tied to financial privilege and high levels of education. The exclusivity of elite culture fostered prejudice among its practitioners, who frowned on the culture of commoners because they considered it indecorous, primitive, or contrary to their Europeanized ideology of progress. By the same token, the cultural expression and entertainments of commoners challenged the values and protocols of the elite and affirmed local identities and their distinctive voices and sensibility. This was not a uniform or organized resistance but rather an authentic expression of a different way of living and seeing the world. The popular theater, the circus, and puppet shows highlighted heroes who shared the language of the man and woman of the street, and whose spicy wit could and did criticize elites or bear witness to social injustice. If the culture of the educated was defined by restraint, and by a quest for order

through new, Europeanized cultural forms, the culture of commoners was both freer and more steeped in the traditions of the past.

All the above may seem to cast the Grand Society and the butcher's stall in opposition. While the divergences between the two are pronounced, cultural life was also very much about the convergence of the two; elite and popular culture were not located on unmovable, separate tracks, but rather on intertwined pathways. In 1852, for example, in a magazine article titled "Operas and Bulls," the Mexican journalist Francisco Zarco complained of the popularity of bullfights among women of refinement, and expressed nostalgia for the days when elites frowned on this lowbrow entertainment. However, in a clever inversion of the usual opposition between the civilized culture of the elites and the "barbarian" entertainments of the masses, Zarco ended his article by attacking the indecorous and rude behavior of people who attended the opera. He complained of how they crammed dozens of family members into narrow theater stalls, chattering and laughing loudly. He griped that this suffocating mass of compressed and unruly humanity was an assault on other theatergoers, like an invasion of US soldiers or a pirate attack.³ For him, attending the opera was not in itself proof of refinement if patrons didn't know how to behave properly during the performance or appreciate its moral superiority over bullfights. If a society's entertainments crystallized its soul and essence, Zarco wrote, the fact that Mexican elites patronized both operas and bullfights underscored that they were lacking in character and refinement. Zarco's humorous essay reminds us that we should not draw a simplistic and rigid opposition between so-called high and low culture. Elite and popular cultural forms exist in a shared continuum rather than in separate locations; cultural objects and expressions from opposite ends of the spectrum come together and move apart. They are rarely locked in place.

This book argues that binaristic thinking is too simplistic to describe how culture works. In the chapters that follow, I propose a more process-oriented definition, one in which binaries break down through contact and blending. For nearly a century, cultural theorists have tried to define this process of combination, beginning with the influential work of the Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz. Ortiz's most famous book, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940), explored the cultural diversity of the island through the interaction of different classes of people, different cultures, and two different kinds of agricultural production: tobacco and sugar. Ortiz denied that dominant cultures simply stripped culture

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away from a subordinate group (deculturation) to force it to acquire the culture of the powerful (acculturation.) Instead, Ortiz coined the word *transculturation* to describe a more complex process by which different cultures come into contact and create something new. He used the analogy of human procreation to summarize this idea: transculturation was a coupling of cultures that gave birth to new cultural forms that carried within them the genetic make-up of their parents.⁴ The idea of transculturation, much debated to this day by scholars, encourages us to think about culture in terms of change, redefinition, and creation, and not in terms of rigid binaries like high/low, Hispanic/Indian, white/black, and so on.

Two Views of the Tiger of the Plains

The contrast between different kinds of culture and values, and the ways that they blend together, can be illustrated by competing representations of a military chieftain from Argentina, Juan Facundo Quiroga. In particular, the story of Quiroga's infamy illustrates the dominant cultural paradigm of nineteenth-century Spanish American elites, who equated their culture with civilization and refinement, and the culture of rural and uneducated people with barbarism. Facundo's story also demonstrates that different kinds of culture dialogued with each other, often in surprising ways.

Juan Facundo Quiroga was born into an influential cattle family in the landlocked province of La Rioja in northwestern Argentina. After playing a supporting role in the Wars of Independence as the captain of a local militia, and foiling a prison escape by captured royalists in the town of San Luis in 1819, he emerged as a charismatic local caudillo. In 1825, when the faraway port city of Buenos Aires and its Unitarian faction enacted measures to bring the interior of the country under centralized control, Quiroga stood against it alongside other caudillos of the interior, who identified themselves as Federalists. For six years, under red or black banners adorned with the motto Religion or Death and the symbol of a cross or a skull and bones, Quiroga waged war against the Unitarians and became the most feared Federalist chieftain of the interior. He was known as the "Tiger of the Plains."

After the defeat of the Unitarians in 1831, Quiroga retired to Buenos Aires as one of the three most powerful military pillars of the Argentine Federation, alongside Estanislao López and Juan Manuel de Rosas. In November 1834 he accepted a commission to travel to Córdoba Province

to resolve a dispute between Federalist governors. After reconciling the men, Facundo Quiroga and his secretary began the long journey back to Buenos Aires on the Camino Real in February 1835. Despite receiving multiple warnings that his political enemies were plotting his assassination, Quiroga continued on his journey in a four-wheeled coach drawn by a train of four horses, with a small party of peons, drivers, and a few mail carriers. On a desolate plain called Barranca Yaco, a dozen gauchos in blue ponchos led by a man named Santos Pérez stormed the carriage and slaughtered the whole group.⁵ The killers stripped the bodies naked and plundered the luggage. When one of Pérez's men pleaded with his commander to spare the life of his nephew, a boy who was apprenticed to the driver of Quiroga's coach, Pérez promptly shot the man and personally slit the child's throat.

This was not the end of Quiroga, however, because he went on to live on in myth, legend, and history as one of Argentina's most memorable political and military figures. In particular, the life and death of Quiroga provide us with a compelling lens for examining the beliefs and experiences of his Federalist supporters. In one oral tradition, glossed by the historian Ariel de la Fuente, Quiroga appears at a village wedding and witnesses the bride declaring her true love for a man in the crowd who is not the groom. Quiroga orders his officers to hang the girl from a tree and has her true love shot immediately. In this tale, as de la Fuente explains, Quiroga plays the role of a powerful father figure who defends the institution of marriage and the patriarchal privilege of families to arrange marriages, regardless of the personal preferences of grooms and brides.⁶ Similarly, the songs that have been preserved about the assassination of Quiroga underscore how local troubadours viewed the leader as a defender of religious values. In one song, titled "Quiroga Lost His Life," this theme is accented by a fictional addition: it places a priest in Quiroga's party on Barranca Yaco and has the assassins mercilessly shoot him down. In another song, "The Virgin of Rosario," Santos Pérez and his men are depicted as a band of Herods—a reference to the king of Judea who ordered all the children in Bethlehem to be slaughtered in an attempt to eliminate the newborn Jesus. By that logic, the song casts Quiroga and his party as murdered innocents. In "The Song of Juan Facundo Quiroga and the Gaucho Santos Pérez," we hear how the singer struggles to sing about the hero's death: "The Virgin Mary appears and requests / that I don't carry on with my song—/ its memory is so sad / you should not listen to it." At another point he cries: "My beloved Vir-

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gin, don't let him / die in Barranca Yaco—/ send him to La Rioja, / send him to chew tobacco over there.”⁷

These oral traditions demonstrate that Quiroga was respected in parts of Argentina by rural peoples who supported the Federalist cause and who depicted him as a religious martyr and a hero. At the same time that these traditions took shape, a different kind of story about Quiroga emerged through the publication in 1845 of one of the most influential books of nineteenth-century Spanish America intellectual history: *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. Like Quiroga, Sarmiento was an imperious man with a larger-than-life personality. He hailed from San Juan in Argentina, which neighbored Quiroga's La Rioja, and came from a devout Catholic family of modest means that supported the Federalist cause. He had been a child prodigy who had learned to read at age four and who demonstrated an insatiable passion for learning and self-betterment. One of Sarmiento's idols was the North American Benjamin Franklin, whose credo of hard work, order, and economy formed the basis of Sarmiento's self-image as a man of humble origins who had pulled himself up from his bootstraps through duty to family, learning, and a principled life of the mind.⁸

Sarmiento experienced a profound political conversion that turned him away from Federalism when he was fifteen years old. He was managing his family's modest country store in San Juan when a mounted Federalist force of six hundred gauchos rode into the town. From the doorway, he watched the men ride through the dusty, unpaved streets between the rows of one-story adobe houses. The fierce, sunburnt men looked monstrous because they were wearing large rawhide chaps that they used to protect their bodies and mounts from the thorns of the chaparral. Their horses nervously reared and jostled for space, startled by the friction of these shields bumping against each other. The restless hooves kicked up dust that enveloped the loud-voiced riders whose wild hair and ragged clothes made them look mad and diabolical. “This is my version of the road to Damascus,” Sarmiento said, comparing his epiphany to the Christian conversion of Saint Paul. “All the ills of my country suddenly became evident: Barbarism!”⁹ The gaucho force of Federalists was a vision of chaos. Sarmiento spent most of the rest of his life trying to counter barbarism with the idea of civilization and its attendant concepts of order, hierarchy, and rationalism.

In 1845, after nearly being killed by a Federalist mob in San Juan, Sarmiento found himself living in exile in Chile, where he worked as a

schoolteacher and a journalist. In May, he began writing a major work condemning the savagery of Argentina's Federalist dictator, Juan Manuel de Rosas. Interestingly, Sarmiento chose Quiroga, who had been dead for a decade, as the focus of his book, instead of Rosas. This was because Quiroga provided a life story with a beginning and an end (unlike Rosas, whose story had not yet reached its denouement), and because Sarmiento was probably more familiar with Quiroga, whose theater of war was closer to his native San Juan than the province of Buenos Aires where Rosas had emerged. Sarmiento cast himself in the role of a necromancer who brings Facundo back to life to reveal the barbaric essence of Rosas and the geographical, cultural, and historical forces that defined Argentinean barbarism.

The parts of *Facundo* that tell the story of Quiroga's life demonize him. Sarmiento compared Quiroga's long, curly black hair to the snakes of Medusa's head, and described several emblematic scenes of terror: Quiroga setting fire to his father's house, Quiroga personally slaughtering fourteen royalists in San Luis with an iron bar, Quiroga ordering two hundred lashes upon one of his officers for telling a joke that wasn't funny, Quiroga cutting open his son's head with an axe, and Quiroga severing the ears of one of his mistresses. Sarmiento also dwelled on the ways in which Quiroga's actions parodied civilization and its protocols. In a mockery of military parades, Quiroga rounded up the well-to-do men of La Rioja at eleven o'clock at night and forced them to march and maneuver in formations until morning, while his officers yelled at them and beat them with batons. Through such anecdotes, the veracity of which have been lost to time, Sarmiento underlined Quiroga's disdain for the rituals of power, discipline, and association that characterized civilized societies.

Sarmiento framed these compelling, dark exploits of Quiroga with a broad argument about what constituted civilized, modern life. He argued that civilization and its beneficent spirit of progress were defined by certain qualities that Quiroga's savagery negated—qualities visible in commercial activity (in both the manufacture and the sale of goods), the rule of law (in the existence of laws, and of administrative bodies for their enforcement), municipal organization (in the structure of government), education (both in schools and in clubs dedicated to the pursuit of learning), ideas (in writing, print, and the free exchange of ideas), a European style of dress and manners, selfless civic spirit, the maintenance of order, and the initiation of new ventures (i.e., entrepreneurialism). Barbarism

and its arbitrary rule of terror destroyed all these indicators of order. Barbarism is anathema to anything other than brute force, terror, bloodlust, and pleasure. It is also anathema to European traditions of mind and culture, which Sarmiento considered seminal for the germination and growth of civilization.

Sarmiento's book about Quiroga became an influential indictment of Federalism in Argentina and was canonized as classic literature in part because of his distinguished career as a writer and his term as president twenty-three years after the book's publication. He succeeded in defining Quiroga for posterity. The more charitable versions of Quiroga's life that we saw in the songs about his death faded into relative obscurity as the printed words of Sarmiento were read and reread, generation after generation inside and outside of Argentina. Regardless of who told the truth—here I am not concerned with the truth of Quiroga, but his image—the voice of the unschooled singers told a story that was different from the one told by Sarmiento. One notable difference was that the singers did not print the songs they sang to preserve them on paper; their Quiroga was the stuff of ever-changing oral traditions, moving across time and space from singer to singer. Another key difference was that their interpretation of Quiroga was conditioned by a different political loyalty (Federalism) and a more traditional (in this case, religious) worldview that had little use for the European ideas of progress that informed Unitarian ideology and Sarmiento's own political thinking.

Is it really accurate, though, to use the opposition between orality and print to contrast the Quiroga of songs to Sarmiento's biography of Quiroga? Immediately after Quiroga's assassination, Federalist printers published numerous accounts, homages, and lithographs about their hero, and some of this print in all probability contained some songs that circulated throughout the interior and entered into the repertoire of regional singers. By the same token, Sarmiento's work, despite its erudition, gets much of its vigor from popular legends and accounts about Quiroga's life, a fact that the author readily acknowledges in more than one passage of his book. Indeed, one researcher has determined that Sarmiento's account of Quiroga's assassination at Barranca Yaco was based on a song about the event.¹⁰ Did Sarmiento have a printed copy of the song or had he heard it? Was he working off of a prose account based on the song? We can't be certain, but the idea that the songs belonged exclusively to orality and that Sarmiento's book was opposed to orality is misleading. What is clear is that the contrast between the Quiroga of oral tradition and

Sarmiento's Quiroga points to the existence of different kinds of culture that were bound together. Sarmiento's vilified Quiroga was informed by an ideology that prized modern ideas culled from European political and cultural thought, while the people's Quiroga was an archetypal symbol of religion and good versus evil. Each cultural expression informed the other, enacting a dialogue about divergent interpretations of politics and identity.

Civilization and Barbarism in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America

Sarmiento classified Argentinian, and by extension, Spanish American culture, along two neatly oppositional categories: civilization and barbarism. For the majority of Sarmiento's intellectual contemporaries and the generation of writers that came to prominence in the last quarter of the century, the dichotomy of civilization and barbarism was a structuring theme for assessing underdevelopment and exploring ways for overcoming it. Francisco Bilbao, in his landmark work *Chilean Sociability* (1844), argued that the *guasos*, or the solitary and primitive horsemen of Chile, embodied backward and fanatical beliefs that threatened Republican values. He evoked the image of marauding *guasos* armed with swords and axes on the streets of Santiago during the War of Independence, their mouths foaming with rage and their eyes burning with hatred as they dragged furniture and other spoils of war through the streets. In contrast to this embodiment of anarchy, Bilbao presented the patriotic, Republican forces of the future: "See the other camp, see those glorious men, see the culture of civilization, see the men of city . . . the enlightened men. . . . See the rifle grasped by the man of industry, and then compare them."¹¹ Bilbao and other proponents of the civilization and barbarism dichotomy commanded writing, reading, and print, allowing them to define what kinds of culture were good for society and what kinds were harmful.

As we can see, the drive to civilize was, in essence, the drive to modernize—to prod Spanish American societies onto the same road to perfectibility that European societies and the United States were supposedly traveling. At the end of the century, this impetus was institutionalized through positivism, a philosophy that sought to use rationalism and science to mold society in the name of progress. The French sociologist

Auguste Comte developed the theory of positivism in a multivolume work titled *Cours de philosophie positive* (Course in positive philosophy; 1830–1842), which argued that knowledge and societies evolve through three well-defined stages: (1) A theological period dominated by a deity or deities, (2) a metaphysical period characterized by appeals to abstraction or broad ideas, and (3) the positive age, in which knowledge is shaped through a scientific understanding of the laws of nature and society. In Mexico and Venezuela, positivism was instrumental in systematizing scientific inquiry, developing educational models and, most importantly, buttressing the policies of their rulers, Porfirio Díaz and Antonio Guzmán Blanco.¹² Influential positivists throughout Spanish America believed that historical change could and should be driven by the purposeful, modernizing actions of men and states rather than vague, ungraspable forces operating outside of human influence. It was an ideology that appealed to elites in many nations because it promoted peaceful evolutionism rather than violent revolution, and because it provided a framework for reasserting ethnic prejudice in scientific terms.¹³ Racism was an age-old problem, but positivist anthropology made it scientifically defensible and rational. In short, positivism renewed the civilization and barbarism dichotomy, refining and rationalizing it at the end of the century.

Not all thinkers embraced the elitism of the civilization and barbarism dichotomy. One of Sarmiento's contemporaries, Juan Bautista Alberdi, accused the "educated barbarians" of being more destructive to Argentina than rural caudillos like Facundo Quiroga and Juan Manuel Rosas. They "contracted loans for sixty millions of hard pesos, allowed the public debt to absorb half the national budget with interest payments, levied taxes higher than those paid in England" and "allowed insecurity to reign in the city and countryside alike."¹⁴ José Hernández, one of Sarmiento's Federalist foes, wrote that city people and their prejudices against the gaucho were barbaric. His poem *The Gaucho Martín Fierro* (1872), which celebrates a noble and persecuted gaucho, helped to fuel a rejection of the formula of civilization and barbarism in Argentina and Uruguay, where cheaply printed stories about victimized gauchos became wildly popular. Another powerful criticism of the civilization and barbarism equation came from the Cuban journalist, poet, novelist, and political organizer José Martí. When he was sixteen years old, Cuban authorities arrested Martí for speaking out against the monarchy and put him in chains in a labor camp where he witnessed atrocities and suffered physical and psychological injuries. After he was freed at age eighteen,

Martí began his remarkable travels around the world: to Europe, Venezuela, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States, where he served as a foreign correspondent for major Spanish American newspapers. In his short life—Martí died on a Cuban battlefield, fighting to liberate his homeland—he saw firsthand the corruption and the pettiness of governing elites in Spanish America, as well as the colonialist ideology of US policy makers. In his groundbreaking article “Our America” (1891), he sought to propel Spanish America in a new direction. “There’s no battle between civilization and barbarism,” Martí wrote, “but rather between false erudition and nature.” He argued that the civilization and barbarism mindset had shackled Spanish America to foreign precepts; to decolonize and defend itself against the political and economic interests of the US and European powers, Spanish America needed to pursue a political philosophy based on local solutions for local problems, as well as to embrace its own humble origins with pride. “Make wine from plantains,” the Cuban famously proclaimed. “It may be sour, but it’s our wine!”¹⁵

Contrasts and Continuities in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America

The phrase “Spanish America” is used by scholars as shorthand for a plurality of “Spanish Americas,” each of which may be divided into increasingly smaller categories of identity, such as nations, provinces, ethnicities, and social classes. The broader the geographical or analytical category, the greater the risk of overgeneralizing and distorting the object of study. What this means is that a truly hemispheric approach to Spanish American culture in any historical period is ultimately a dramatic study in contrasts. Cultural variation reflects ethnic diversity and the intersection of place and history. In the Caribbean, African culture has left a deep mark, whereas in Guatemala and Peru, the enduring presence of indigenous people and languages has created distinct cultural patterns. Literacy rates in late nineteenth-century Argentina and Uruguay (near 70 percent) were at least ten times higher than that of other Spanish American countries, meaning that print culture in the Southern Cone was more impactful and widespread than elsewhere. Baseball became popular and politically significant in Cuba, which had close geographical and cultural ties to the United States, but much less so on the South American mainland. The musical form of the *corrido*, a narrative song related to medieval Spanish