Chapter 4

Creating National Identities

In Latin America, states preceded nations. In other words, countries became independent and were endowed with governing institutions before the diverse inhabitants of each country had acquired a strong national identity. The patriots of independence had fought, for the most part, under the banner of *América*, defined mostly by their refusal to remain colonies of Spain and Portugal. By the mid-1800s, however, the region had fragmented politically into many separate, independent states, more than a dozen new nations had begun to emerge, and Latin American writers went to work elaborating national identities to go with them. What did it mean to be Bolivian or Mexican or Colombian? Writers answered this question by invoking the formative experiences of daily life, such as food, clothing, religion, and language—shared *customs*, in other words. Their writings, called *costumbrismo* from the Spanish word for customs, constitute the primary sources for this chapter.

The diversity of Latin American populations constituted a direct challenge to the creation of new national identities. The inhabitants of new Latin American nations had roots on three continents, and their differing historical experiences—which involved plenty of social conflict—were more likely to create hard (divisive) feelings than warm (unifying) ones. Centuries-long processes of transculturation and race-mixing offered unifying themes, but these themes had to be woven into stories that the people of each nation could "tell themselves about themselves," in a famous phrase. Moreover, in order to be stories that could inspire a sense of common identity across lines of class and race, these stories needed to provide a sense that

humble people of African and indigenous descent, the descendents of the conquered and enslaved, shared a history and customs with the descendents of the conquerors and enslavers, a difficult task to say the least. But humble people could not be left out of the story because they were assumed to be the primary bearers of authentic national culture, the upper classes being more subject to foreign influence.

Costumbrista writers, one could say, sought to paint distinctive national self-portraits. One collection of costumbrista writing excerpted for this chapter was entitled precisely *A Mexican Self-Portrait*. It presented a series of social "types" (the water carrier, the store keeper, and so on) who, in aggregate, were supposed to comprise the nation. *A Mexican Self-Portrait* is really about Mexico City. Most of nineteenth-century Latin America's readers and writers lived in cities, especially capital cities, so they could most easily identify with urban customs and "types." The Brazilian selection, which focuses on Rio de Janeiro, provides another good example. Meanwhile, the Argentine selection concentrates on rural "types"—especially the herdsman, or *gaucho*. Rural people were considered the most representative of national authenticity because they lived close to the land and were less "corrupted" by foreign influence. The Colombian selection, from the Romantic novel *María*, likewise portrays the countryside. *María* also represents, in its most blatant form, the impulse to depict harmonious feelings shared across the lines of race and class. Sometimes, as in the excerpt presented in this chapter, the depicted harmony is paternalistic in character. Other times, as elsewhere in *María*—and in many other novels of nineteenth-century Latin America—divisions of class and race are bridged imaginatively by romantic love.

The Peruvian selection is also about shared good feelings, but it concentrates on history. In Peru, as elsewhere, the wars of independence had been civil wars. Both patriot rebels and loyalists who fought against the rebels in the name of the king were, for the most part, natives of the New World. And yet the wars of independence were the great dramas of patriotic history in which writers placed their national protagonists, the founding fathers and inspirational heroes whose stirring quotations children had to memorize in

school. The true, divisive character of the wars of independence had to fade a bit from people's minds before these struggles could be turned into dramas of unity and social harmony, which is why *Bolivar's Justice* comes last chronologically in the chapter.

Materials in this chapter come from some of the leading Latin American authors and literary texts of the day. *Facundo* is arguably the most important Argentine book of all time. *María* was probably the most widely influential novel, not only in Colombia, but in all of nineteenth-century Latin America. Creating national identities was serious work without which fledgling nation-states could never be strong and stable.

FACUNDO

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (born 1811) was a liberal intellectual, an adversary of the Argentine caudillo Juan Manuel de Rosas, and finally president of Argentina (1868–74). His biographical/historical/sociological essay Civilization and Barbarism: The Life of Facundo Quiroga and the Geography and Customs of the Argentine Republic *(1845), became unquestionably one of the most important foundational works of Latin American thought and literature. While not a work of* costumbrismo, *it certainly does paint a national self-portrait. The following excerpts deal especially with the impact of landscape on society, an idea (highly influential in the nineteenth century) known as "environmental determinism." Sarmiento believed that the vast plains of Argentina left an indelible imprint on the people and helped explain the rule of men like Rosas.*

The limitless, thinly populated plains that stretch more than seven hundred leagues from Buenos Aires to Salta and Mendoza constitute the most notable interior feature of the Argentine Republic. Across these plains, caravans of enormous two-wheeled oxcarts roll freely without encountering the least obstacle, without needing the hand of man to clear the way of trees or thickets. No more than the efforts of the individual and the effects of the natural environment are required to open avenues of communication. Society can do little to improve them.

The leader of one of these caravans needs an iron will, a character bold to the point of recklessness, to defend and dominate his subordinates amid the solitude. At the least sign of insolence, he raises his mighty iron-handled lash and dishes out wounds and contusions. If resistance continues, rather than his pistols, which he seldom deigns to draw, he leaps from his horse, knife in hand, and quickly reestablishes his authority by the superior skill with which he wields it. Thus, the conditions of Argentine life establish the primacy of brute force, the superiority of the strongest, the authority without limits or responsibility of those who give the orders. On these long journeys, the common people of Argentina acquire the habits of life outside of society, hardened by privations, struggling individually with nature, depending only on their personal capacity and wit against the dangers that surround them continually.

The population that dwells in these extensive regions is composed largely of two different races, Spanish and Indian, that mix together to form an array of intermediate shades. In addition, the black race, which has almost disappeared except in the province of Buenos Aires, has left behind its own intermediate shades of mixture with Spanish and Indian, largely in the cities. With some exceptions, these three races have fused in a rural population distinguished by its lack of industry and love of idleness. This unfortunate situation seems to have resulted mostly from the social incorporation by the Spanish colonizers of native races that have shown themselves incapable of hard, sustained labor even when compelled by force. It was that incapacity, precisely, which led to the fatal importation of African slaves. Nor has the Spanish race proved much more industrious when abandoned to its instincts amid the wilderness of América. Only education and the incentive of social betterment can hope to improve the national population.

SOURCE: adapted from Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie en la República Argentina* (Madrid: Editorial América, 1916), pp. 24–43, 48–51.

It is pathetic and shameful to compare the settlements of German or Scottish immigrants in the province of Buenos Aires with rural settlements of native Argentines. In the former, the houses are painted, their front yards always neat and planted with flowers and shrubbery. The furniture is simple but adequate. The tableware is of copper or tin, but brightly polished. The inhabitants are in constant motion milking cows to make cheese and butter, from which some families have managed to amass fortunes large enough to enable them to move to the city and enjoy the comforts of urban life. In the latter settlements, the rural homes of native Argentines, the situation is unhappily reversed. Unkempt, ragged children scurry in packs like dogs, filth and poverty everywhere. Men lie around on the ground, in the most complete inaction. A small table and a hide-covered box or two may be the only furniture in each miserable hut notable for its general appearance of barbarism and carelessness.

Amid the limitless spaces that we have described stand fourteen cities, scattered here and there: the provincial capitals. Argentine cities have the regular layout of almost all Spanish cities in América. Their streets intersect at right angles and their habitations are widely spaced, excepting only the case of Córdoba, which is denser and more European-looking—an appearance accented by the multitude of domes and bell towers belonging to its numerous and magnificent churches. Cities are the locus of Argentine, Spanish, European civilization. In cities, one finds commerce and industry, justice and education, government and laws, notions of progress, everything, in sum, that characterizes a people of culture and refinement. The man of our cities wears European clothing and leads a civilized life such as that of civilized men anywhere else.

When one sets foot outside the cities of the Argentine Republic, however, everything changes immediately. The man of the countryside wears different clothing and leads a totally different life. Far from desiring to imitate the urban man, the country man rejects European luxuries and scorns refined manners and clothing. Anyone who dares show himself in the country wearing a tailcoat, for example, or mounted in an English saddle, would attract aggressive mockery, and worse, from the people of the countryside. In the countryside society lapses into feudalism or disappears completely.

Governance becomes impossible because the police cannot exercise their function and the courts have no way to extend their control over criminals. Domestic life loses its moral compass as curates abandon their solitary chapels and religion lapses. Civilization itself founders, and barbarism becomes the normal state of affairs.

In the absence of all the means of civilization and progress, which can only develop when people are gathered in a numerous society, behold the life of the countryside. Women take care of the house, prepare the food, shear the sheep, milk the cows, make the cheese, and weave the crude fabric from which the clothing is made. All domestic and household labors, virtually all the work of any kind, rests on the shoulders of the woman. At best, the man may plant a bit of corn for his family, but little and rarely, for no kind of bread figures in its daily diet. The children develop their physical strength in play. If male, they begin early to practice use of the lasso on goats and calves, and as soon as they begin to ride horseback, which they do not long after learning to walk, they are off across the countryside. By the time they have become young men, they achieve complete independence and also utter idleness. Their education is at an end, at that point, and they have become *gauchos*.

One must see, in order to believe, the indomitable character that emerges from this education, from this struggle of the isolated individual against nature. One must see the grave expressions of the gauchos, framed by beard and tousled hair like that of an Arab, to appreciate the disdain with which they regard the sedentary city-dweller who may have read many books but has no idea how to take down a wild bull, who has not the faintest notion how to catch and mount a mustang when finding himself on foot, alone, on the open pampa, who has never faced a puma's attack by thrusting one poncho-wrapped hand into the mouth of the lunging animal while driving his knife into its heart with the other hand. Their incessant individual struggles against nature have given Argentines of whatever class a prodigious national arrogance that offends the other people of América, who often accuse them of excessive vanity. I do not deny the charge but do not regret its truth. Woe is to the nation without faith in itself, for it will never accomplish great things!

The conditions of a cattle herder's life on the pampa thus create grave difficulties for any kind of political organization and much more so for the triumph of European civilization with all the liberty, prosperity, and institutional development which that civilization confers. On the other hand, one cannot deny that the pastoral life has its poetic side. If national literatures are able to shine forth in the new societies of América, it will be in the description of their grand natural environment and, above all, in the portrayal of the imposing struggle between European civilization and native barbarism, between intelligence and brute force. That struggle produces scenes and characters animated by an interior drama alien to the spirit of Europe and therefore exceedingly unexpected to anyone educated within the normal circle of European ideas. Among the resulting customs and social types there are some highly notable ones, destined someday to provide originality and brilliance to the theater and fiction of our new American nations.

In Argentina, the most conspicuous, the most extraordinary, of all is the figure of the tracker. To some degree, all gauchos are trackers. On plains so wide open, where paths crisscross, where cattle graze freely and horses amble in all directions, one must be able to recognize an animal's hoof prints, distinguish them from a thousand others, and follow them for miles. One must be able to know whether the animal is directing its own movements or being led, whether its pace is rapid or slow, whether it bears a burden or not. These are normal skills that all plainsmen must possess.

Once, when I was travelling with a guide across the plains, we came to a crossroads and he studied the ground, as such men so often do, and said: "Here's a mule I know, an excellent saddle animal that belongs to don N. Zapata. It was unsaddled yesterday, though, when it passed by here." The guide was coming from the Sierra de San Luis, and the mule train that had left the track was returning from Buenos Aires, hundreds of leagues distant. The man had not seen the mule in question for a year, and now he recognized its hoof prints among those of an entire mule train that had passed along a trail two feet wide. This seemingly incredible, but nonetheless far from unusual, ability was demonstrated by a common herder, not a professional tracker.

The tracker by profession is a grave and circumspect personage whose declarations are accepted without question by local judges. His knowledge gives him a certain dignity and mystery in the eyes of others, who treat him with consideration, the poor because they fear him, the rich because they need him. Imagine that a theft has occurred during the night. As soon as it is discovered, people hurry to identify a footprint left by the thief and, upon finding one, they cover it with something so that the wind does not dissipate it. They call the tracker, who takes one look at the footprint and then sets off in the direction it indicates, hardly looking at the ground, as if his eyes register in high relief a trail imperceptible to everyone else. He walks down streets, crosses yards, enters a house, and pointing at a man inside it, says quietly: "It's him." The case is considered closed. It is a rare criminal, indeed, who dares challenge the tracker's verdict. The judge will consider it persuasive proof. To deny it would be unthinkable, absurd. The criminal bows to the testimony of the tracker as if it were the accusing finger of God himself.

I personally had the pleasure of meeting Calíbar, a famous tracker who exercised that profession in a certain province of Argentina for forty years. Today he is nearly eighty years old and, although stooped by age, remains venerable and dignified. Whenever someone mentions his fabulous reputation, he shrugs. "I'm old and worthless now, but there you have the children." These "children" are, of course, his grown sons, who exercise the profession they learned from such a famous master.

The stories they tell about Calíbar! Once, when he was away on a trip to Buenos Aires, someone stole his best dress saddle and bridle. His wife found a footprint and covered it with a wooden bowl. Two months later, Calíbar returned, inspected what remained of the footprint, which was hardly anything, and nothing more was said about the matter—until a year and a half later, that is, when Calíbar came down a street on the edge of town, eyeing the ground, walked into a house, and found his saddle and bridle, now blackened and worn with use. He had finally picked up a trail almost two years old!

In 1830, a man condemned to death escaped from jail, and they called Calíbar. The escaped prisoner, certain that he would be tracked, had taken all the precautions that a fear of execution

suggested to his mind—all of them useless! In fact, they may have further contributed to his demise, because Calíbar took them as a challenge to his reputation and outdid himself. The fleeing prisoner took advantage of every opportunity not to leave a trace of his passage. He went for entire blocks on tiptoe, crossed walled gardens, and doubled back repeatedly. Calíbar was right behind him. The prisoner walked a distance in the water of a drainage ditch and leapt out without leaving a footprint on the edge. Useless. Calíbar saw drops of water on the grass. The man climbed into a walled vineyard. Sometime later, Calíbar arrived, inspected the walls, and announced calmly: "He's inside." A squad of soldiers searched the vineyard and found nothing. "He didn't leave," said the tracker, without a second look. And he was right. The next day the fugitive was executed.

In 1831, a group of political prisoners were planning an escape with the help of sympathizers on the outside. When all was in readiness, someone remembered: "What about Calíbar?" The others gasped, suddenly stricken and terrified: "Calíbar!" Fortunately for them, the political prisoners' families were able to persuade Calíbar to feign illness for four days following their escape, and thus they were able to get away without any difficulty.

What an amazing mystery! What can explain the microscopic eyesight of these trackers? How sublime is the creature that God created in his own image!

Analyzing the Sources: *What is Sarmiento's attitude toward the native Argentine "types" who appear in this selection? What do cities and the countryside stand for, respectively?*

MEMOIRS OF A MILITIA SERGEANT

Manuel Antonio de Almeida

Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant *(originally serialized in a newspaper, 1852–53) by Manuel Antonio de Almeida (born 1831) is one of the earliest*

significant Brazilian novels. It depicts the city of Rio de Janeiro during the residence there of the Portuguese king, João VI, who travelled to Brazil in 1808 to escape the clutches of Napoleon. The novel contains many passages that describe the social customs of the period it depicts. The author addresses the reading public of his own city and frequently contrasts an 1850s "now" with "the time of the king," two generations earlier.

PROCESSIONS

In Rio de Janeiro, the day of a procession has always been a big holiday with nonstop excitement and crowds. Our readers well know what a big deal processions still are today. Let them imagine, then, what things were like in "the time of the king," when they were an even bigger deal than now. The streets overflowed with people, especially women wearing mantillas. People decorated their houses by dressing their open street windows with truly magnificent silk and damask fabrics in every color. Small musical stages were set up in almost every wide place in the street. What went on is what still does, only more, and more grandly, "because it was done with faith," the old ladies of the time would say. We, on the other hand, might say, "because it was the fashion." Contributing to the lavish displays of religious festivals was in style, back then, as much as the women's big hairdos or the particular cut of their dresses.

There were more processions then, as well, and the groups who put them on competed with each other to make their particular procession the most lavish and luxurious. The processions of Lent stood out for their extraordinary pomp, especially when the king joined them, so that all the courtiers had to join the procession, too. And the most outstanding procession of Lent was the one put on by the goldsmiths' guild. Nobody stayed home on the day of that procession. Whether on the street or perhaps in the house of friends who were

SOURCE: Manuel Antônio de Almeida, *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* (Rio de Janeiro: Imprenta Nacional, 1944), pp. 27–33, 102–4, 117–19.

fortunate enough to live along the route, everybody found some way not to miss the "Goldsmiths' Procession," as they called it. Some folks were so devoted that, not satisfied to see it only once, they went from one friend's house to another, watched on this street, then ran to the next, and pronounced themselves satisfied only when they had seen the whole procession two or four or even six times.

The big draw of the Goldsmith's Procession, among other things, was an element shared by no other regular procession in Rio, and our readers may think it rather silly, yet it is our obligation to describe things as they were. The element that attracted such enthusiasm was a group of so-called Baianas who led the procession and attracted the eyes of the devout spectators fully as much as did the sacred emblems and the saints' images carried aloft behind them. The group of Baianas was composed of black women wearing the traditional clothing of the Province of Bahia, hence the name. At pauses in the religious chant that accompanied the procession, the Baianas danced a special dance. To tell the truth, they were worth seeing, and surely there was nothing wrong in using them to open a religious procession.

Everybody knows the characteristic dress of black women in Bahia. It is among the prettiest traditional costumes we have seen, and yet we do not advise anyone else to adopt it. A country where all the women wore that costume, especially if it were one of those fortunate countries whose women are pale and lovely, would be a land of temptation and, no doubt, perdition. Here is a description. Baianas wear several skirts and petticoats that reach no lower than the knee, each one adorned with magnificent lace. From the waist up, they wear only a thin and delicate white blouse, likewise adorned with lace at the neck and sleeves. Around the neck, they wear a gold or coral necklace or (the poorest among them) a necklace of colored glass beads. Around their heads they wrap a large piece of stiffly starched white cloth to make a small turban, and on their feet, they wear high-heeled sandals so tiny that only their toes fit inside the shoe leather, leaving the instep and ankle quite bare. And over their shoulder they gracefully drape a black shawl, but without covering their bare arms adorned with circular metal bracelets.

The Divine Holy Spirit

As everyone knows, the feast of the Divine Holy Spirit is among the favorite festivities of the people of Rio de Janeiro. Even today, as the city's populace gradually lets go of old habits, some good and some bad, the *Divino Espírito Santo* still produces considerable excitement, and yet, nothing like what it produced in the old days. The author of the present book can remember seeing the Divino as a child, and already people were saying that this was nothing, that the holiday had been better in years past, just as the old ladies of today say that everything has gone downhill since whenever. Yet there is no arguing about the following. Rather than starting on Palm Sunday, when I was a boy the festivities of the Divino commenced nine days earlier, with *novena* prayers.

Let us describe the Folias, a special and distinctive part of the festival—the street event that heralded it—even though our readers probably have some notion already. During the nine days leading up to the festival itself, a group of boys of about nine to eleven years old made music and danced in the street every day. They wore broad-brimmed straw hats covered with flowers, and each of them carried a drum, a tambourine, or a musical instrument. With them went other musicians who performed as the group moved along. At the front, or sometimes totally surrounding the boys, went a cluster of men wearing the habit of the lay brotherhood that organized the Folias. These "brothers" carried red banners and other religious insignias; when the group stopped so that the boys could sing and dance in front of a house, the men in habits circulated soliciting contributions in support of the festivities.

The focal point of all this was a boy, normally smaller than the rest, who wore a suit of green velvet, and on his chest, an enormous shining emblem of the *Divino Espírito Santo*. This young "Emperor," as he was called, walked slowly, wearing a grave expression, with the other boys forming a hollow square around him in the street. Confess, readers, that this would be an extravagant sight. As soon as music was heard in the street, everyone inside the houses rushed to the windows to see it.

Sorcery

Down by the mangrove swamp on the edge of old Rio stood a miserable thatched hut so dirty on the outside that one dreaded to imagine the inside. It was composed of two rooms and furnished by three stools, a few reed mats piled in a corner, and an enormous wooden box with the multiple functions of bed, dining table, wardrobe, and china cabinet. The house was almost always closed up, lending it a sinister air, and it was inhabited by a man of the most detestable appearance, an old *caboclo*,* his face filthy and repugnant, his body covered with rags. The reader will be surprised, no doubt, to learn that the function of such an inauspicious being was, in the expression of the day, to "bring fortune."

In those days, people put great store in such stuff, and they regarded the practitioners with superstitious respect. Obviously, the astute practitioners turned that respect to their endless advantage. And it was not only the common people who believed in magic spells. It is said that members of Rio's high society paid considerable money in the illicit purchase of magical good fortune.

A respectable man named Leonardo was one who sought out the *caboclo* of the mangrove swamp, the most famous practitioner in Rio. Leonardo subjected himself to countless little procedures, each of which began with a monetary contribution, all without results. He had suffocating smoke blown on him and drank foul-tasting brews. He had learned by heart certain mysterious prayers that he was supposed to repeat many times a day. Almost every night, at the direction of the *caboclo*, he had to place objects or quantities of money in specific places around the city to propitiate certain divinities. Still no results. So Leonardo decided to undergo the final procedure, which was arranged for the stroke of midnight in the house by the mangrove swamp.

At the appointed hour, he arrived to find the disgusting sorcerer standing in the door, refusing him entry until he took off his clothes and allowed himself to be draped with a filthy blanket. The interior of the hut was adorned with magical paraphernalia so ridiculously sinister that we will not take the trouble to describe it in detail. We will mention, however, that among the things whose significance only initiates in the *caboclo*'s magic properly understand, there was a small fire burning in the middle of the room.

*A man partly, if not entirely, of indigenous descent.

When the ceremony began, Leonardo had to kneel in the four corners of the house and recite the incantations that he had memorized, as well as new ones learned on this occasion. Then, as he knelt by the fire, three figures emerged from the other room of the house and, joined by the *caboclo*, began a sinister dance around the kneeling figure . . .

Analyzing the Sources: *How do various elements of the author's description of life in early nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro add to an emerging picture of Brazilian national identity?*

A MEXICAN SELF-PORTRAIT

Various Authors

The 1855 book Los mexicanos pintados por si mismos *was an unusual project of costumbrismo, an illustrated, comprehensive gallery of Mexican social types contributed by many authors. The "types" included only a few women, such as the midwife, the seamstress, the socialite—and the* china *(pronounced* chee-na*), described in the following excerpt. Although* chino/china *means Chinese in Spanish, the meaning of* china *here is from an indigenous language and has nothing to do with Asia. The Mexican* china *was an unmarried, independent young woman of the popular class, normally a mestiza. Had Fanny Calderón worn the poblana dress given her in 1840, she would have been dressing as a "*china *poblana." After the portrait of the* china *comes further description of Mexico City housing in the period.*

This column is going to get certain people's dander up, namely the fashionable, glove-and-corset-wearing set, women who dance schottische and polka-mazurka, who paint their faces and attend the opera. "How audacious," they will say: "How brazen and ungentlemanly! To write about a 'china,' of all things, a lowly plebeian, as if Mexico City had no more worthy subjects for a journalist's pen, such as coquettes or women who read, and even write! Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera . . ." They might as well say: "As if Mexico City had no belles who have achieved a striking resemblance to their French or English or even Russian counterparts." Certainly no Aztec princess would recognize the attire of a coquette. On the other hand, it is true that an Aztec princess might not recognize the china's clothes, either. But let's just say that, when it comes to looking Mexican, the lovely, fresh, and innocent village china beats her social betters by a long shot. Therefore, the china is the first type of Mexican woman whom I will present, begging the pardon of coquettes and feminine literati, who obviously constitute a useful contrast against which to portray the eminently *national* china.

So, out of here! Out, I say, all you high-society types, so English, so French! Make way for my china, a true daughter of Mexico! Make way for the pearl of our poor neighborhoods, the soul of our all-night fandangos, the flower of our bronze-skinned masses, a woman who makes my knees go limp, my eyes go starry, my. . . . If you don't like flattering adjectives and poetic comparisons, dear Reader, then you might as well turn the page, because my portrait of the china is going to be full of them.

The particular heroine of this article is named Mariquita. She is only twenty-three years old and has twenty-eight lovers, including the owner of the corner store and the son of the local police inspector. She has black eyes capable of undermining the strongest male resistance, dark, velvety skin, a slender waist, and a totally disarming level of grace and self-confidence. She never gets faint-

SOURCE: adapted from *Los mexicanos pintados por si mismos: Tipos y costumbres nacionales por varios autores* (Mexico City: Imprenta de M. Murguía, 1854). The excerpts are from "La china" by José María Rivera (pp. 89–98) and "La casera" by Niceto de Zamacois (pp. 230–34).

LA CHINA was one of the most notable "types" portrayed in the illustrated *Mexican Self-Portrait* of 1855. Her "Poblana dress" mixed materials and elements from the Old and New Worlds. *Wikimedia Commons.*

ing spells or sick headaches or the other stylish afflictions of her delicate, modern cousins. Mariquita lives in a rented room, and she keeps the door open, because cleanliness is her strong suit, and that applies to her person, her clothing (and not just the outside layer), and her living quarters.

Her room is small, but its floor is spotless. There is a bed in one corner, with modest linens, scrupulously clean. Beside the bed, a wooden chest where she keeps her dresses, her petticoats, her shawl, her sewing basket, and a few romantic novels. Her necklaces may or may not be there, depending on the day of the week, because they are regularly in the pawn shop except for Sundays, when she finds money to rescue them temporarily before pawning them again on Monday or Tuesday. On the walls, her favorite images of the Virgin Mary. Look quickly, and off we go to find the china who has disappeared and will most likely be found where you hear that music coming from, a neighborhood fandango.

It is a wake, as it turns out, and cheerful enough, because the deceased is a tiny newborn, already an angel in heaven by this point, so why not eat and drink and dance to ease our pain here on earth? The drinking and dancing started two hours ago. Both musicians and dancers have been taking a shot of tequila before each number and have achieved an exemplary level of *public spirits*. The only person not markedly animated, at this point, is the deceased. You have got to see Mariquita dance, especially now that she is squaring off with a man who has just arrived, the neighborhood's most celebrated dancer of our national *jarabes*. The partygoers crowd in a circle around the two dancers, who face each other and maintain a small distance between them. Mariquita's feet begin moving like quicksilver on the pavement, her body follows like a seductive flame from side to side, she glides forward to incite and challenge her partner, almost brushing against him at one moment, then backward, disdaining his advances. She does her best to provoke him to a maximum effort, because she has vowed to conquer him at his best. Her eyes flash with enthusiasm, the nostrils of her lovely nose flair, her chest heaves, her luscious lips open slightly with fatigue, and her skirts fly, hitting some crouching spectators in the face, filling all the men with desire.

One of the male spectators, his *zarape** wrapped around his lower face to disguise his identity, now provokes Mariquita's dance partner with an insulting remark. The dancer ignores it, but a second insult spurs him to pull a knife from his belt and attack his challenger, who, with similar speed, draws his own blade. Mariquita recognizes that the challenger is her *hombre*, as she would say, and she quickly steps between the angry men and tries to separate them, begging the onlookers for help. She would gladly die, at this moment, to protect her man, but the neighborhood night-watchmen have heard the ruckus and appear to stop the fight.

A moment later, Mariquita is furious because they have arrested her hombre, and she gives the night-watchmen a piece of her mind, then begins a relentless campaign to get her beau out of the slammer. Nothing intimidates her, nothing turns her aside, she is a blur of determined action. First she acquires and cooks the food that the prisoner will need in jail and takes it to him there. She appeals to the judge, pesters his scribe, gives the municipal authorities not a minute's rest, until finally she manages to win the release of her champion. Sad to say, that very night he may repay her with a barrage of kicks and shouts, but Mariquita is used to that and will stay loyal despite it all.

And that is another of the advantages that she has over you modern women. But enough of such invidious comparisons! You can console yourselves, oh, modern painted beauties, with the thought that, while still flourishing in Oaxaca, Durango, and Guadalajara, the true and legitimate china—lovely, steadfast daughter of Mexico, with her characteristic garb—is fast disappearing from the streets and plazas of our cosmopolitan capital city. In a few years, she will be but a memory. Alas!

Everyone knows (and those who did not know before will know now) that the poor and middling inhabitants of Mexico City live in houses each of which is something like a town in itself, divided into many individual rooms and apartments with their own numbering. The most impoverished live on the ground floor around the

*An outer garment worn by men, not dissimilar to a woman's rebozo.

interior patio. Here one finds the so-called *tortilleras*, barefoot and wearing poor clothing, their thick, straight, black hair unkempt, kneeling to knead the boiled corn that they call, in Nahuatl, *nixtamal* on the tiny stone platform called a *metate*, where they make *tortillas*. The tortilleras occasionally reprimand their filthy, naked children who are engaged, perpetually, in trying to sneak a finished tortilla out of the basket where these are placed. Meanwhile, the husbands of the hardworking tortilleras (generally water carriers or construction workers) lie sprawled serenely on straw mats spread out on the floor, thinking neither of the past nor of the future, which always, for this class of people, amount to the same thing anyway. What need have such people to concern themselves with the future, when they are content with their straw mats, where they sleep fully clothed to avoid the need of a blanket? They do not require a knife or fork because they eat with their fingers, and have no need of a spoon, because a tortilla will do to scoop up soup or beans. What need to think of the future have people without any ambitions, people who do not require such furniture as a wardrobe because every day they wear all the clothes that they possess? The ground-floor apartments around the patio consist in only one room each, and the room in question serves as workshop for tortilla production, kitchen, living room, dining room, and bedroom for two or more couples and their children, along with the inevitable compadre or comadre or two, who all sleep together side by side on the floor.

Next door to the room that we have just described live an old woman and her two daughters who sew for a living. They work night and day just to earn enough to appear in the Sunday paseo on the Alameda in a halfway decent muslin dress. Their room contrasts with the first one because it is kept scrupulously clean and because there is a bed where the old lady sleeps in one corner and a chest containing the family's clothes in another. Atop the chest, is a blanket rolled up in a spotless straw mat which the two daughters spread on the floor at night, so to sleep beside their mother's bed. In a third corner is a platform with coals for cooking and a large earthen container of water, and in the fourth, a small triangular table upon which sits a potted basil plant, and above that, several cheap graven images of

the Virgin of Soledad, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the Holy Trinity. A few simple and inexpensive but dust-free chairs stand about the room, which is generally decorated with good taste.

Let us now ascend to the second storey where the larger apartments, consisting in more than one room, are located. A stone stair leads up from the ground-floor patio to a wide walkway that surrounds it on the second storey, giving access to the apartments of middle-class tenants. These are people whose manners may be just as refined as those of the upper-class, with the difference that these people are hard-working, the hardest working, in truth, in all Mexico City. Here one finds office clerks, skilled artisans, retirees—in sum, decent people of modest means.

In one of these apartments lives a piano teacher who supplements his income by giving house parties every week. His young wife, who much enjoys such diversions, takes charge of the refreshments and makes sure that there will be some young women present, even though the paying guests have the right to bring their own dance partners. The paying guests are generally prosperous artisans or young men who work as retail or office clerks, with an army officer or two generally in attendance as well—overall, a good-humored, well-spoken, well-dressed crowd of excellent dancers. They generally come by themselves, however, which is why the wife invites the young women who live on the ground floor (and sew or take in washing) to attend the dance at no cost. They appear wearing starched petticoats that plump up their rather inexpensive but well-ironed dresses. In their gleaming black hair, the young women wear crudely-made artificial flowers, and in their gloved hands, they carry handkerchiefs so soaked in cheap perfume as to cause dizziness. . . .

Analyzing the Sources: Costumbrismo *is almost always strongly gendered, this selection in particular. Discuss it in terms of the voice of the narrator and his attitude toward several of his subjects. What role does social class play?*

MARÍA

Jorge Isaacs

The Romantic novel María *(1867) by Colombian author Jorge Isaacs (born 1837) exemplifies a tendency, common in Romantic fiction, to idealize the social relations of the countryside, presenting an image of paternalistic harmony between landowners and their rural laborers—in this case, slaves. Popular dance constituted a standard touchstone of national-identities-under-construction. Like the* jarabe *mentioned in this chapter's selection on Mexico, the* bambuco *described below was understood to be a "national dance," enjoyment of which bridged social classes. The narrator, a young man who has just returned from years of study in Bogotá, the national capital, is inspecting the family's sugar plantations with his father.*

During my absence, my father had made numerous notable improvements to his properties in the hot country of the Valle del Cauca, including a beautiful and costly new sugar mill, new sugarcane fields to supply the mill, new pastures full of horses and cattle, and a luxurious new country residence with outbuildings.

The slaves, as well-dressed and happy as slaves can be, were submissive and affectionate with my father. Among them, I encountered young men with whom I had played in the woods years before, when we were boys, and they gave unmistakable signs of pleasure at seeing me again. There was one sad absence, however: Pedro, my good friend and faithful companion, an older man who had been assigned to accompany and look after me when I was little. He had shed tears on the day of my departure for Bogotá when he lifted me onto the horse that would carry me away, saying, "Little master, I won't ever see you again!" His heart had told him that he would die before I returned, and so it was.

SOURCE: Jorge Isaacs, *María* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1943), pp. 17–20.

I observed that my father treated the slaves with warmth and kindness while maintaining an attitude appropriate to his authority as their master. He displayed concern for the good conduct of their wives and lovingly caressed their little children.

One afternoon, at sundown, my father, the overseer, and I were returning from the fields to the sugar mill. While the other two men discussed work that had been done, or that still remained undone, my mind was occupied by reminiscences of childhood: the fragrance of ripe fruits, the peculiar smell of a stand of trees that had been cut down to expand the fields; the raucous chatter of flocks of small parrots in the *guayaba* orchard; the distant sound of a shepherd's horn echoing though the hills; the jocular noise of slaves returning slowly from their daily labor in the fields, carrying their tools on their shoulders; and the sight of evening colors in the sky, glimpsed here and there between the swaying stands of *guadua* cane. Everything reminded me of the afternoons when my sisters and María and I, having finally gotten my mother's permission to go play, did anything we liked, climbing our favorite guayaba trees to pick the ripe fruit, watching the parrots come and go at their nests by the corral.

We came upon a group of slaves, and my father addressed one of them, a fine-looking young fellow.

"So, Bruno, has everything been arranged for your wedding day after tomorrow?"

"Yes, master," Bruno replied, removing his straw hat and leaning for a moment on the handle of his shovel.

"Who will be the godparents?"

"Señora Dolores and señor Anselmo . . . if you approve, master."

"Fine. Be sure that you and Remigia go to confession first, no? Was the money that I sent enough to buy everything?"

"Yes, master, everything."

"And you don't need anything else?"

"Whatever you wish, master . . ."

"How about the room? Is it a good one?"

"Yes, master."

"I'll bet I know what you want . . . a dance, isn't that right?"

Bruno laughed and smiled broadly, showing the dazzling whiteness of his teeth. He looked at his friends.

"It's only fair, because you've earned it with good behavior," said my father, and he turned to the overseer, adding: "Arrange it. And make sure they enjoy themselves."

"Will Your Mercies be leaving before the wedding?" inquired Bruno.

"No," I answered with a smile, "we will consider ourselves invited, then!"

Early in the morning of the following Saturday, Bruno and Remigia were married. At seven o'clock that evening, as my father and I mounted our horses for the short ride to the wedding dance, we could already hear the music.

When we arrived, Julián, one of the overseer's trusted subordinates among the slaves, a gang boss, appeared to greet us and take our horses. He had on his Sunday best, and from his waist hung the insignia of his office: a long machete with silver trim. The big house of this plantation, where my family had formerly lived, was now occupied only by farm tools, and these had been cleared out of a large room for the dance. Benches had been placed around the walls, and suspended from the ceiling hung a wooden chandelier holding half a dozen flickering lights. The musicians and singers—a combination of slaves, former slaves, and poor neighbors—stood in one of the doors. The instruments were nothing more than two rustic flutes, two shakers, an improvised drum, and a tambourine. But the black singers' high voices rendered the *bambuco* melodies with such mastery, their song contained such a heartfelt combination of moods, from gay to melancholy, and the lyrics were so tender and simple, that this semi-wild music would surely have enchanted the most cultured musical connoisseur.

The men wore jackets and hats, and so my father and I entered the room without taking ours off. The two people dancing at that moment were Bruno and Remigia. Remigia—wearing a skirt with blue ruffles and artificial flowers, a white blouse with black embroidery, and a red necklace and earrings—danced with all the gentle grace that her supple waist suggested. Bruno—his poncho thrown back over his shoulder, ironed white shirt and pants, a new machete at his waist—danced with masculine vigor and admirable skill. Then Julián announced that the next number would be in honor of

the master, and the band played the most beautiful *bambuco* in its repertoire. Remigia, encouraged by both her new husband and the gang boss, screwed up her courage and danced for a few moments with my father, but her movements in the dance became less spontaneous and she did not dare to raise her eyes the whole time. After about an hour, we said goodnight.

Analyzing the Sources: *What elements contribute to the idealization of rural life in this passage? Why do you think that scenes of people dancing figure so prominently in such idealizations?*

BOLÍVAR'S JUSTICE

Ricardo Palma

Ricardo Palma (born 1833) was Peru's most important nineteenth-century author, the long-time director of its national library, and a man partially of African descent. Palma cultivated his own genre, which he called "traditions," brief texts like the following, not exactly history and not exactly short stories, rather a cross between the two. He wrote them for decades during the second half of the 1800s, this particular one in 1877. To understand "Bolívar's Justice," it is crucial to keep in mind that Bolívar's patriot army in Peru was composed mostly of Colombians, a situation that led to inevitable tensions.

In June of 1824 the patriot army was billeted at various points in the Andean highlands of Ancachs, preparing itself for the campaign that, in August of that year, resulted in the battle of Junín and, four months later, in the splendid triumph of Ayacucho. Bolívar was residing at Caraz, and had with him his general staff, Neocochea's

---

SOURCE: Ricardo Palma, "Justicia de Bolívar," in *Bolívar en las tradiciones peruanas* (Madrid: Compañía ibero-americana de publicaciones, 1930), pp. 9–17.

calvalry, La Mar's Peruvians, and the several battalions—Bogotá, Caracas, Pichincha, and Voltíjeros—that were later to distinguish themselves under the command of José María Córdoba. Another division, formed by the Vargas, Rifles, and Vencedores battalions, was stationed in the city of Huaraz.

The patriot officers were prone to gallant adventures, fearless and undefeated on the battlefields of both Mars and Venus. Just as they had enlisted to struggle heroically against the seasoned and numerous royalist army, when not actually fighting the enemy, they assaulted the impulsive daughters of Eve with no less energy and fervor. The officers of this largely Colombian army thus gave motive for anxious excitement among young women, considerable heartache among the mothers of those who were not married, and unmitigated sorrow among the husbands of those who were. Those infernal military peacocks could not pass a single halfway attractive young thing without saying, in the words that Córdoba later uttered so famously on the battlefield of Ayacucho: "Advance to victory!" The familiarities that they allowed themselves in Huaraz were enough to upset the least prickly and least suspicious husband. How easily those young liberators crossed the line!

The door of every house in town stood open to them, and there was no use in trying to shut them out, because they were adept at besieging any citadel and always found some way to gain entrance. Moreover, nobody dared to shut them out. They were in style, one could say, and during this phase of the struggle for our national independence, nobody wanted to appear a lukewarm patriot. Finally, it would have been the height of ingratitude to turn up one's nose at men who had come from the distant banks of the Cauca and Apure Rivers to share the hardships and glories of our struggle to break free of Spain.

The division billeted in Huaraz had a real brass band, and after evening roll call, the officers, who, as we have indicated, loved to party, were in the habit of taking the music to some house in town—whichever one they so desired—for a bit of impromptu dancing, to which the mistress of the house invited other women of the neighborhood.

A certain lady, whom we will call Señora de Munar, the widow of a wealthy Spanish inhabitant of Huaraz, had a house not far from the town's main plaza and lived there with two daughters and two nieces, all of whom could be considered extremely marriageable because they were pretty, rich, well-bred, and belonged to the established aristocracy of the locality. In the expression of the day, these girls had "salt, pepper, oregano, and cumin," which is to say, everything that men from Spain looked for in a woman from América.

Now, this Señora de Munar, doubtless out of loyalty to her deceased Spanish husband, was a zealous royalist, but one night when the young Colombian officers appeared at her house with their musicians and manifest intentions of arranging a dance, she could find no way to exclude them from her aristocratic drawing room.

As for the girls, it is well known that their hearts leap at the prospect of a dance. The señora swallowed hard and remained silent at each bit of flirtatious flattery that the officers directed to one of the damsels. Occasionally she pinched the arm of a niece whom she saw melting with indecorous delight. Periodically, she admonished under her breath the excessive attention paid by a daughter to the young liberators' gallantries. But that was all.

It was already after midnight when one of the young ladies—one whose charms had aroused the imagination of a captain of the Vargas Battalion—began to feel herself indisposed and withdrew to her room. The smitten young libertine, believing that he could successfully evade the vigilance of the girl's mother, went in search of the nesting place to which his turtledove had retired. The dove resisted the insistent demands of this don Juan, which were probably crossing the line, indeed, when from behind a hand snatched the sword that hung from his waist and plunged it into his body.

The person who thus punished actions that were about to dishonor her family was the elderly Señora de Munar.

The captain ran into the drawing room covering the wound with his hands. His comrades, among whom he was well beloved, thundered with anger, and, after surrounding the house with soldiers and

rounding up all the "suspects" in skirts, they carried the dying man back to their barracks.

The news of the uproar reached Bolívar just after lunch in Caraz. Immediately he mounted his horse and rode to Huaraz, arriving there within a very few hours.

That very day he issued the following communiqué to the entire army:

"His Excellency the Liberator has learned with indignation that the glorious flag of Colombia carried by the Vargas Battalion has been disgraced by those who ought to be the most zealous custodians of its honor and splendor, and in consequence, as an exemplary punishment for this offense, he decrees the following:

"First, the Vargas Battalion will henceforth occupy last place in the army's formation, and its battle flag will not be returned to it until a victory over the enemy erases the infamy which has befallen the battalion.

"Second, the body of the offender will be buried without military honors, and the sword that Colombia gave him to defend liberty and morality will be broken in front of the assembled troops."

Such an order is worthy of the great Bolívar. And such was required to maintain the prestige of the cause of Independence and restore military discipline.

Sucre, Córdoba, Lara, and all the other Colombian commanders insisted that Bolívar strike the provision that disgraced the entire Vargas Battalion because of a fault committed by a single officer. The Liberator denied their request for three days, at the end of which time he conceded to it. The moral lesson had been taught, and maintaining the first provision of his order now mattered little.

The Vargas Battalion cleaned the stain of Huaraz by means of the valor it displayed in the actions of Matará and Ayacucho.

After the funeral of the Colombian captain, Bolívar went to Señora Munar's house and said to her:

"I salute you, señora, with all the respect due to a worthy matron who, despite her womanly weakness, found the strength to save her honor and the honor of her family."

From that moment on, Señora de Munar stopped being a royalist, and she answered with enthusiasm:

"Viva el Libertador! Viva la Patria!"*

Analyzing the Sources: *Because of their particular history, Peruvians found the Wars of Independence problematic as inspirational national history. Where is this evident in the preceding selection?*

*Long live the Liberator! Long live our Country!