



Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2007, 304-309

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Review/Reseña

William Anthony Nericcio, *Tex{t}-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of The "Mexican" in America*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

The Seductive Style of a Tex-Mex Cultural Critic

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One gets the impression that William Anthony Nericcio, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University, is an excellent, if highly-caffeinated, educator. *Tex{t}-Mex: Seductive Hallucinations of The "Mexican" in America*, his first book, captures the excitement and vitality of intellectual discovery and growth as possible only in the most invigorating university classrooms. An urgent enthusiasm bleeds from Nericcio's writing, resulting in a nearly hyper-textual collection of essay and image that colors outside the lines of academia. Nericcio produces a hybrid scholarship; he does not merely present and analyze his objects of study. Instead, Nericcio remixes popular icons and images,

breaking them down by revising them to produce his own media messages. It is this level of ambitious engagement —getting his hands textually dirty, so to speak— that makes *Tex{t}-Mex* worthy of reflection.

Tex{t}-Mex is simultaneously accessible and theoretical, popular and academic. While the book claims to “assess the impact of various image and narrative industries on Latinas/os in literature, art, and mass culture,” it does much more (28). Nericcio catalogues and critiques the many so-called Mexicans parading in media culture, revealing them to be little more than perverse manifestations of “animated, conjured, fabricated [and] costumed ‘monsters’” (173). While Nericcio assails the myriad images masquerading as Mexicans/Mexican-Americans in U.S. visual culture, his argument is not solely relevant for this one group; after all, the homogenizing tendencies of media culture are not too precise and the impact of these images —how we understand ourselves or others as a people, as a nation— is felt by all Latinos/as and beyond. By focusing on these Tex{t}-Mexs however, Nericcio reminds us that the emergence of motion picture technology and proliferation of picture postcards—“the email of their day” (25)—all featured and profited from the “visually memorable spectacle of scoundrel Mexicans” (128). Nericcio scrutinizes these “Mexican” types found, not in the shadows, but in the bright spotlight of U.S. mass culture.

While nearly all of the chapters in this book have been previously published, the collection is justified: one must read *Tex{t}-Mex* from beginning to end to appreciate Nericcio’s contribution to the fields of Ethnic Studies, Chicano/a Studies, Film Theory and Cultural Studies. Essays are arranged chronologically according to their inception, chronicling a sixteen-year development of thought in the space of one book. This organization enables the reader to experience the interdisciplinary maturation of Latino/a Studies and Media Studies through one scholar’s body of work. Likewise, each successive essay enhances the previous argument to produce a more cohesive whole—paralleling, perhaps, the clarity Nericcio has experienced in the course of his own intellectual development.

The collection is organized into five chapters, with a “Backstory,” two “Interstices” (or “Seductive Hallucination Galleries”) and a “Conclusion” framing the previously published content. The “Backstory” and “Seductive Hallucination Gallery One: An Interstice” are some of the most compelling pieces, as they synthesize a variety of artifacts (advertisements, discarded toy boxes, comics, cartoons, etc.) to deftly produce a microcosm of the book—not a small feat for a collection birthed over a longer period of time. Subsequent chapters are organized around one primary and well-known cultural text or icon—such as the Orson Welles film *Touch of Evil* (1958) or the cartoon figure Speedy Gonzalez. Nericcio builds upon this analysis and enhances his point by intersecting theoretical debates with various textual and visual examples. The reader is continually beckoned to abandon the essays at hand for the bounty of images, captions and sidebars that Nericcio uses to support, supplement or complicate his own argument; in many cases, this argument is further enhanced by the author’s own artistic work.

Nericcio’s first chapter, originally published in 1992, is a challenge to previous cinema scholarship about Orson Welles. Using *Touch of Evil*, Nericcio highlights what previous readings of the film neglect—that an “unseen, unnamed half-breed (*el mestizo*) is at the center” of the film (42). With this essay, Nericcio begins to bridge the gap between Ethnic/Chicano Studies and Film Theory—an interdisciplinary mode that informs subsequent chapters in the book. Chapter two questions the nominal “Americanization” of Rita Hayworth by recounting the many changes she endured (in name and body) to become a more profitable Hollywood figure. This concept of body-as-text is “autopsied” in chapter three: the body in question is the Warner Bros. cartoon character Speedy Gonzalez. In this chapter, Nericcio organizes some of his most enthralling evidence by producing a cultural context for an animated creation. By the end of the chapter, we know that a little rodent dressed in the traditional garb of Mexicans from Vera Cruz is neither ahistorical nor innocuous. The fourth and fifth chapters focus on the importance of re-visioning mass media and Nericcio seats Lupe Velez and Frida Kahlo at the center of these projects. It is here that Nericcio introduces the term “xicanosmosis” as a means of

recognizing the collaborative flow existing between two cultures—a concept more commonly “bordered” in early Cultural Studies models.

While *Text-Mex* shakes, scrutinizes and embraces well-known and long-loved popular culture icons for our benefit, it is the moments of autobiography that prove the most enduring. In a markedly Chicano move, Nericcio’s personal narrative frames much of his analysis; as an avid consumer of media culture since his boyhood in Laredo, Texas, personal history has clearly impacted his experience and appreciation of cultural collision. For example, Nericcio’s emphasis on education is most evident in his public recognition of the mentors and students that have enriched his own life and scholarship; it is easy to imagine that these collaborations have influenced his conversational-analytical writing style. Finally, several moments of personal history bristle the reader, illustrating the real-world impact of stereotypes. Towards the end of his book, Nericcio provides a compellingly autobiographical “interstice” entitled “Being a Second Archive of Visual Pathogens.” In this space, he chronicles several moments that have clearly left a mark—or at very least intensified an intellectual path. In one, Nericcio is the anonymous focus of a university newspaper’s “Crimewatch” feature: in it, he and a friend become “two suspicious Hispanics” while studying in a university parking lot (189). As Nericcio notes, the placement of this news item in the school paper’s crime section is most puzzling since “no crime was reported, as of yet” (189). While the interstice weaves multiple narratives into this intervening space—including a critique of Richard Rodriguez’s writings—these reflective moments are some of the most poignant in Nericcio’s book.

Despite the striking impression that Nericcio is an invigorating lecturer and scholar, this dynamism does not seamlessly translate to every page of *Text-Mex*. The author’s playful willingness to test the limits of form and content by presenting his own visual reconfigurations of mass media imagery and adeptly synthesizing high-theory and popular culture is invigorating, but this method occasionally overpowers its argument. While the writing and visual styles largely reinforce Nericcio’s reasoning, periodic moments of excess—some of the less refined multimedia artwork and intermittently tangential paragraphs—can exceed the point and belabor it.

The methodologically informative but overburdened essay titles provide an encapsulated example of this problem. Chapters two and three—entitled “When Electrolysis Proxies for the Existential: A Somewhat Sordid Meditation on What Might Occur if Frantz Fanon, Rosario Castellanos, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, and Sandra Cisneros Asked Rita Hayworth Her Name at the Tex[t]-Mex Beauty Parlor” and “Autopsy of a Rat: Sundry Parables of Warner Brothers Studios, Jewish American Animators, Speedy Gonzalez, Freddy López, and Other Chicano/Latino Marionettes Prancing about Our First World Visual Emporium; Parable Cameos by Jacques Derrida; and, a Dirty Joke,” respectively—produce compelling arguments. Upon first reading, however, the titles overpower the text and challenge the reader to comprehend the essay’s aim within the scheme of a larger book. Like these titles, earlier chapters would have benefited from a stricter editing process; for example, the many strong points of the *Touch of Evil* or Rita Hayworth essays could have been streamlined and consolidated into more concise chapter introductions. Finally, the book’s organization according to essay conception makes for awkward transitions and flow; each chapter’s importance can seem incomplete without the experience of its subsequent sisters and as a result, *Tex{t}-Mex* may be most effective when taught as a whole rather than as selections.

Despite these limitations, Nericcio’s lively archive is a truly ambitious collection of pop-culture evidence and theoretical observations. Scholars researching at the intersection of Ethnic Studies, Chicano/a Studies, Media Theory and/or Cultural Studies will find Nericcio’s book both informative and engaging in the classroom. While the combination of conversational language and supporting images make the book largely accessible for any undergraduate course, it seems best utilized for upper-division students familiar with theoretical language or critical writing. Nericcio’s ability to hybridize textual analysis and high-theory with humor (of word and image) occasionally produces an uneven tone; in the classroom, such moments may require a little finessing on the instructor’s part.

As a lifetime's worth of visual data chronicled with fierce detail and wit, *Tex{t}-Mex* proves to be an exciting reminder of the many ways our scholarship can and should be informed by the dynamism of the classroom. While Nericcio professes that an understanding of the undermining tendencies of brown stereotypes is crucial, he warns against inadvertently promoting the culture industry by way of excessive attention (22). It is here that Nericcio's fire for the classroom burns brightest, reminding us that the potential for change exists in the liveliness of our scholarship— not only in writing, but “student by student, mind by mind, imagination by imagination...at the crossroads of the pedagogical and the scholarly” (22). As the divide between research and teaching institutions—and the requirements to meet the demands of each—seems to grow, Nericcio proves that one cannot exist without the other. At one point, we have all been touched, invigorated by a scholar and encouraged to pursue an academic career. Nericcio recognizes the continuum of scholarship that propelled academics from students to public intellectuals; one can only hope his next volume— if another sixteen years in the making— bears the same imperfect vitality of a pedagogical job well done.