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“The Spanish Element in Our Nationality:” Spain and America at the World’s Fairs and Centennial Celebrations, 1876–1915 by M. Elizabeth Boone

Reviewed by Maria Dorofeeva

M. Elizabeth Boone,

“The Spanish Element in Our Nationality:” Spain and America at the World’s Fairs and Centennial Celebrations, 1876–1915.

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M. Elizabeth Boone’s *“The Spanish Element in Our Nationality:” Spain and America at the World’s Fairs and Centennial Celebrations, 1876–1915* is a highly ambitious project that spans several nations, addresses a breadth of materials, and draws on multiple archives. This beautifully illustrated book offers a valuable new resource to scholars interested in the histories of international exhibitions and nation building. It also contributes to multiple fields, including the histories of art and architecture, nineteenth-century studies, as well as Iberian, American, Latinx, and transnational studies.

Boone’s work reflects the renewed scholarly interest in the World’s Fairs and integrates previously unexamined geographic perspectives.^[1] In contrast to previous scholarly examinations of the US at the World’s Fairs, Boone’s study offers the first in-depth exploration of how the US, Spain, and the former Spanish colonies used the international exhibitions as a medium to manufacture their respective national identities in relation to each other. The first part of the monograph’s title, *“The Spanish Element in Our Nationality”*, is the title of a Walt Whitman essay from 1883. In this essay, Whitman amends his countrymen’s assumption that their national identity originates from British contributions alone. Similarly, Boone’s book explores the erasure of the Spanish element from the US self-image as a newly formed nation and restores its significance. According to the author, between the years of 1876 and 1915 Spain was effectively written out of United States history.

The United States government promoted narratives that located the nation's origin point at Plymouth Rock rather than in Florida, New Mexico, or any other part of the US where Spanish roots predated the arrival of the English. The author examines Spain's participation at the fairs and exhibitions mounted in the United States, Spain, France, Argentina, Mexico, and Chile. Her work explores how Spain defined and positioned itself in regard to the United States and its former colonies. It also studies US responses, alterations, and subversions of Spain's message, "which made it possible to marginalize, ignore and ultimately forget Spain and its relevance to the history of the United States" (12).

Boone's book places an impressive array of archives and visual objects into dialogue with one another. It reveals how architectural spaces, paintings, photographs, prints, ephemera, and other forms of national display explored nationhood. Using a wide range of primary source material from newspapers, periodicals, and archives, Boone reconstructs the exhibitions' histories and contextualizes them in relation to other forms of public display, including political cartoons, civic sculpture, and popular parades. The book builds on the current scholarly literature on US, Latinx, Iberian, and Latin American studies, weaving together theories of exhibition display, national identity, and memory, with the interpellation of religion, politics, and economics, alongside art and visual culture.

Boone's book complicates notions of US and Spanish identity and nationality, as well as the idea of "America" as such. Spain and its exhibitions offer a particularly useful lens through which to consider questions of nationhood and memory, because its history intersects with those of both the US and the various host countries of World's Fairs in provocative ways (7). Historical propaganda that positioned the Spanish as brutal conquistadors in contrast to the peaceable English colonizers obscured Spanish contributions to US national identity (11). The failure to recognize "the Spanish element in our nationality" in all its complexity resulted in issues that affect the Latinx population today (11).

Boone's study is organized chronologically. Each chapter focuses on the exhibition or a set of exhibitions that illustrate an issue concerning the representation of Spain. Chapters 1, 3, and 5 examine the exhibitions mounted in the United States—in Philadelphia (1876), in Chicago (1893), and in San Francisco and San Diego (1915), respectively. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the exhibitions in Barcelona (1888) and in Paris (1889), while chapter 5 looks at the 1910 Centennial Exhibition in Latin America, that is, in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Santiago de Chile.

Chapter 1, "Inventing America at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial," examines Spain's participation and reception at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial. The extant scholarship has not engaged with Spain's contribution at the Centennial, nor its significance and reception, until now. Boone explores the reasons behind the fair goers' and critics' hostile reception of Spanish history painting, especially Antonio Gisbert's canvas *The Landing of the Puritans in America* (1864). She argues that Gisbert's was an unpalatable manifestation of the US and Spain's shared history, which was deemed inappropriate subject matter for Spanish artists (41). In contrast, Spanish food products and cigars generated great interest among the Philadelphia exhibition visitors, as did the display of Spanish historical and religious objects. The US public and critics used these objects to validate their own view of the United States as a modern and industrial nation that had little in common with a supposedly antiquated and

Catholic Spain (17). Throughout the chapter, Boone draws on the historical context of the burgeoning Catholic immigration to the United States; the countries' competition for agricultural markets; and the broader nineteenth-century project of inventing US national identity in relation and opposition to its European rivals and American neighbors. Boone argues that the US visitors and critics at the Philadelphia Centennial embraced the image of the US as "America," a modern industrial nation, whose roots were traced to the embarkment of the Pilgrims in the 1620s, setting aside the country's multinational history. Even though Columbus was recognized as the "discoverer of America," Spain's contemporary relevance was minimized in favor of the nation's English roots (48).

Chapter 2 focuses on the Barcelona (1888) and Paris (1889) expositions. Both have received significant critical attention. However, Boone's chapter offers the first examination of their contribution to the construction of Spanish national and regional identities. While the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial gave the United States the opportunity to invent itself as "America," these exhibitions enabled Madrid's Restoration Government to define and defend its own notion of Spain. This chapter examines the Spanish government's struggle to use these expositions to present Spain as a unified nation within its own unruly national borders. While most nineteenth-century World's Fairs were held in capital cities, the 1888 Universal Exposition took place in Barcelona, an industrial city with its own distinct Catalan history, language, and traditions. This national heterogeneity made the regional differences more pronounced and problematized the Restoration government's narrative of national unification at the Barcelona World's Fair. Organizers in Barcelona were in the delicate position of negotiating their regional identity in relation to Madrid, as well as to Spain's other regions and the other countries participating in the exhibition (63). Equally problematic was the Spanish presence at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris, which most European monarchies boycotted due to the event coinciding with the anniversary of the French Revolution. The Spanish identity on display in Paris was complex and contradictory. This ambiguity allowed Parisian audiences to emphasize the aspects they found useful and to distort and discard the ones they considered problematic. This chapter demonstrates the ways in which Spanish self-representation at the exhibitions brought the subject of regionalism and questions of center vs. periphery in Spain to the fore. It is worth noting that the book's argument concerning Spain's relationship to its regions could be strengthened by analyzing the gendered representation of Madrid and central Spain in Spanish discourse as masculine and visually aligned with history painting, particularly in relation to other regions and other forms of artistic production.

Chapter 3, "Marginalizing Spain (and Embracing Cuba) at the 1893 Columbian Exposition," examines how the Spanish government used the 1893 Exposition as an opportunity to reclaim a key role in the construction of American identity (13). This is one of the book's most ambitious and impressive chapters, both in its geographic scope and the sheer volume of diverse cultural materials it covers. The 1893 Exposition was dedicated to the four-hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas. Boone argues that, for the Spanish government, Spanish participation at this event offered a means to emphasize common values and shared history with the US (87). The Spanish used a recreation of the Valencia Silk Exchange, a building that was finished in 1492—the year that Columbus sailed—to serve as its national pavilion. They also prepared large exhibitions for the Woman's Building, the Agricultural Building, the Palace of Fine Arts, and the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building; sent two replicas of Columbus's caravels as a gift to

the United States from the Spanish people; and sent the Duke of Veragua (Columbus's direct descendent) and Spanish Princess Eulalia to represent the nation. Boone's examination and interpretation of Spain's diverse display greatly contributes to the scholarship. However, while Boone reveals that US critics praised the Spanish display at the Woman's Building as one of its strongest, she does not articulate the reasons behind their judgement. It would be interesting to examine the role that gender played in their critical assessment, especially so close to the War of 1898, when ideas of a castrated and emasculated Spain became widespread. The elevation of the "woman's display" over (traditionally masculine) history painting at the exposition would further support the author's argument concerning Spain's marginalization in the US. Through the exhibition displays, the Spanish government sought to foster trade relations, to reassert Spain's position in the Americas, and to bring its notions of Spanish identity to the fore. To that end, Spanish officials combined architectural sources and exhibited products from the many heterogeneous regions of Spain, including Castile, industrialized Catalonia, North Africa-inflected Andalusia, and colonized Cuba (119). Spain's display in the Agricultural Building exhibited agricultural products from Spain, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. Trade was a contentious issue for Spain, Cuba, and the United States, because Cuba was seeking to trade directly with the United States, while the Spanish government attempted to maintain control over Cuba. When publishing the photographs of Cuban and Puerto-Rican displays, the US press omitted Spain's name from the captions, thus representing Puerto Rico and Cuba as sovereign nations. This omission created much tension with Spain (95). In spite of the elaborate Spanish display at the exposition, the US fairgoers marginalized Spain by contrasting the illustrious Spanish past with its diminished present (119).

Chapter 4, "Reasserting Spain in America at the 1910 Centennial Exhibitions," explores problems and controversies that marked the Spanish exhibitions mounted in Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, and Mexico City, which were staged to celebrate a century of independence from colonial rule. The exhibitions analyzed in this chapter take place after Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898—that is, at a moment when Spain was seeking to assert its dominance in America, and Latin American nations were searching for ways to establish or underscore their independence. The Spanish government used these exhibitions to reinsert Spain into American history. Mexico, Argentina, and Chile featured Spanish painting in their commemorations of liberation from colonial rule. The government in Madrid supported this move by sending official delegations to all three centennials (121). While the aforementioned Latin American republics used these events to promote their differing notions of national identity, the Spanish government claimed them as an opportunity to reassert its presence in the Americas. At the same time that the Spanish government emphasized the fraternal relations and shared history with the Latin American nations, Spanish art offered these fledgling republics a strategy for creating national art that was their own: while Spanish artists and architects participating in the 1910 centenaries drew on Spanish regional histories, styles, customs, and landscapes, Latin American artists turned to their own regional and national histories. These local subjects and imagined histories helped them to shape new national visual rhetorics (153).

Chapter 5, "Using Spain to Ignore Mexicans at the 1915 California Fairs," explores the opposition between contemporary and colonial Spain at the 1915 commemoration of the Panama Canal opening. San Francisco and San Diego competed to host the event. San Francisco won the right to stage the official Panama-Pacific International Exposition, but San

Diego proceeded nonetheless to produce the Panama-California Exposition. This emphasized its historical ties to Spain and created a fantasy Spanish city within twentieth-century US borders. Officially, Spain was absent from the San Francisco Fair. Spanish artists who wished to participate acted alone (164). By 1915, Spain was marginalized in the US fairs and the officials in Madrid were concentrating their energy on renewing Spanish cultural ties with Latin America instead. As a result of Spain's official absence in California, organizers in San Francisco and San Diego were free to imagine their own versions of Spain and California's Spanish past (183). Mexicans, many of whom worked as gardeners and construction workers in San Diego, provided the invisible labor that made the California fairs possible (184). Boone draws on a fascinating set of San Diego studio photographs and postcards to argue that California's Spanish fantasy produced a safely European and racially pure history that ignored Mexico's presence in the Southwest and the mixed-race ethnicities of many Mexican Americans in the United States (186). Nevertheless, the visual record suggests that their presence could not be erased. Boone argues that the representation of Spain in these events and the position of *Californios* (the descendants of Spanish-speaking settlers who came to California in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) and Mexican people in the US offer us a deeper understanding of US national identity today.

"The Spanish Element in Our Nationality" is a welcome contribution during an important historical moment, when the US relationship to its Hispanic heritage and present-day culture is being reconfigured. July 29, 2020, marked the establishment of the National Museum of the American Latino with the approval of the US Congress, as part of the omnibus spending bill. Drawing on the visual culture of the nineteenth-century World's Fairs, Boone's book puts in perspective the historical origins of the tension between the US and its Spanish roots.

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Notes

[1] See: Tracey Jean Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn, *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World's Fairs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Alejandra Uslenghi, *Latin America at the Fin-de-Siècle Universal Exhibitions* (New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2016); Rebecca Rogers and Myriam Boussahba-Bravard, eds., *Women in International and Universal Exhibitions, 1876–1937 (Routledge Research in Gender and History)* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017).