

Book Review/Reseña

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Juan Pablo Dabove. *Bandit Narratives in Latin America: From Villa to Chávez*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017.

Ten years after the publication of his award-winning *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and Literature in Latin America 1816–1929*, Juan Pablo Dabove brings the study of bandit representation in elite spaces into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with *Bandit Narratives in Latin America: From Villa to Chávez*. The title of Dabove's excellent newer work forgoes reference to a strict time frame and instead names two individuals: Villa, who could not escape the stigma of the label, and Chávez, who embraced the legacy of banditry as an act of political legitimization.

The complex history of banditry and the labeling of outlaw violence, then, is present from the start for readers who might not associate the Venezuelan president with historical banditry. In the Preamble Dabove analyzes Porfirio Díaz's characterization of the Mexican people (*pueblo*) as having "devolved into armed gangs" (xiv), that is, had become bandit-like. Díaz then made use of the bandit trope to legitimize his time in power while equating his opposition with lawlessness. Dabove argues that the paradox of Díaz's eventual resignation offers insight into how banditry can be used to both legitimize and stigmatize.

Concretely, Dabove extends his examination of "the uses of the bandit character as a cultural trope in literature . . . and in discursive practices that do not belong to literature proper, but that tap into literature's authority and prestige" (2). As in his preceding book, *Bandit Narratives* limits itself to a handful of countries—Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela, with Peru appearing only in the more recent book—where "a tradition of bandit literature had a prominent place in the national literary canon and in the larger national imagination" (*Nightmares* 39). As a continuation, *Bandit Narratives* does not delve into the theoretical groundwork that one would expect if it were a stand-alone volume—namely a definition and contextualization of bandits/banditry, including a review of the relevant literature and related issues—since he has already done so in the preceding book.

Bandit Narratives is composed of thirteen chapters, divided into four parts, in addition to a preamble and an introduction. Twelve of the chapters deal with bandit narratives and bandit discourse directly, with the final chapter attempting to answer the question, "What is a bandit?" The chapter eschews traditional conclusions in favor of "reflections that . . . help reinforce what this book (and the one preceding it) has tried to do" (261). However, Dabove is not ultimately concerned with a concrete definition of "bandit." Instead, he examines how or why the bandit trope is used and evoked in elite contexts such as literature and politics. In other words, a bandit, in theory, is anyone who is called (or calls themselves) a bandit; the task of the researcher is to understand the motivation for such labeling.

Of the four sections, "Part I: Banditry, Self-Fashioning, and the Quest for Legitimacy" might be considered an outlier, for its two chapters do not analyze traditional literary texts, but rather an autobiography and a body of political discourse, respectively. The *Retrato autobiográfico* of Pancho Villa and Hugo Chávez's proclaimed link to the Venezuelan popular bandit Maisanta—to whom he was related—bookend the study's time period, as these "two revolutionaries . . . fashion their public images by embracing an outlaw past" (10). Villa and Chávez frame themselves as embodiments of the nation and its people as they craft a discourse of legitimacy. Dabove's analysis of a well-known excerpt of a speech directed to then-president George W. Bush illustrates Chávez's evocation of his bandit lineage via a "masculine rural challenge" (48).

In "Part II: Banditry and the Epic of the Nation," Dabove brings together a range of texts that afford the bandit "a significant role in the crafting of twentieth-century nationalism" (11). Analyzed in the section are Arturo Uslar Pietri's *Las lanzas coloradas*, Rafael Muñoz's *iVámonos con Pancho Villa!*, Enrique López Albújar's *Cuentos andinos*, and a selection of texts by Jorge Luis Borges. In these chapters, Dabove demonstrates how bandits play a necessary part in the formation of national identity. In *Las lanzas*, for example, the slave leader Presentación, who fights for the Boves royalists, is contrasted to Bolívar, the leader who "is identical to the Nation" (70). Though Presentación appears in opposition to Bolívar, the bandit figure also stands at the center of this narrative of national identity, for he "had to have existed for Bolívar to become what he is" (77). This dichotomy, for Dabove, exemplifies the way in which "war . . . simultaneously constructed and destroyed an order of identity definitions" (85). The duality of banditry is further explored in how those who existed outside the law also had their own laws, in particular, codes of loyalty (in *iVámonos con Pancho Villa!*) and courage (in Borges's stories).

"Part III: Banditry and the Latin American Left" focuses on two perspectives of how bandits might "fit" into a Marxist revolutionary ideal. Banditry, often associated with the struggle against the powers that be, becomes a vehicle by which Jorge Amado, in *Seara Vermelha*, explores the "development of a peasant class consciousness, which enables it to tackle the challenge of capitalism in its most developed form" (150). Conversely, for José Revueltas, in *El luto humano* and *Los días terrenales*, banditry causes a reexamination of the tenuous relationship between party and individual, culminating in "the loss of knowledge by the *letrado* (party militant or priest) confronted with the rural outlaw" (175). Dabove ultimately concludes that, in

the bandit figure, Amado is able to find a nascent revolutionary, whereas Revueltas offers a deconstruction of sorts of “Marxism as a set of dogmas . . . in favor of a hybrid version of Marxism” (13).

Finally, in “Part IV: Banditry and the Dilemmas of Literature,” Dabove addresses the issues that arise in banditry as an interpretive model. Borges vacillates somewhat in his treatment of bandit/gauchos in presenting banditry as an “enigma” (210); Guimarães Rosa uses the bandit narrative to explore the “paradoxes of violence . . . [and therefore] the paradoxes of meaning in language” (217). Both Mario Vargas Llosa and Ricardo Piglia place the writer at the center of the reflection on outlaws and outlaw narratives where they “have a revelation of their lack of understanding of the events they are witnessing” (246). The last section shows the complications that make a totalizing approach to banditry impossible, which is rounded out with Dabove’s final reflections on the topic. Even though the closing chapter of the book bears the title “What Is A Bandit?,” the author avoids a concrete definition, stating: “Tracking down the bandit is impossible because his name is legion. It is only possible to trace the myriad conflict scenarios in which the bandit appears, and how his role has played out in each of these” (275).

Bandit Narratives in Latin America: From Villa to Chávez constitutes an excellent and fitting follow-up to *Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and Literature in Latin America 1816-1929*. In a way, the work could indeed stand on its own as a thorough and engaging treatment of a vast body of texts, but when considered in conjunction with his previous work, these two volumes provide an invaluable resource on bandits and banditry, outlaw violence, and depictions of them. For the bibliography alone, these works offer the reader a wealth of information, and when combined with Dabove’s critical eye and insight, both texts will likely find their way onto many researchers’ bookshelves.

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