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Simón Bolívar and friends: Recent biographies of independence figures in Colombia and Venezuela

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Abstract

The biographical genre is closely linked to the process of state building throughout Latin America and the Atlantic world. In the 19th century, statesmen and scholars produced hagiographies of their heroes' lives and viciously attacked their enemies' reputations. In a survey of recent academic biographies of independence figures in Colombia and Venezuela, several themes quickly become apparent. First, general biography remains extremely popular with both readers and writers for a broader public (including for children), but rigorous, well-documented, scholarly studies are much fewer in number. Second, the genre remains dominated by studies of the lives of Euro-descended creole men, most of whom were military or political actors, overwhelmingly aligned with patriot side, and resident in urban areas. Third—and directly related to the previous trend—is that most of the biographies are predicated on the concept of glory and glorious achievements. Fourth, biography remains a stubbornly national genre; in research sources and content, there appears to be little cross-fertilization and content across countries, continents, or languages. And finally, Simón Bolívar remains a towering figure, not only because of the sheer number of biographies devoted to him specifically but also because he casts his long shadow over the life stories of virtually everyone else.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The biographical genre is closely linked to the process of state building throughout Latin America and the Atlantic world. In the 19th century, statesmen and scholars produced hagiographies of their heroes' lives and viciously attacked their enemies' reputations. Historian John Lynch observed that biography remains an active and important genre because "the independence of Spanish America is incomprehensible without the presence of the liberators." In his view, "the challenge is one of interpretation, rather than facts, although interpretation is impossible without facts and the facts themselves are often in dispute" (Lynch, 2006). In a very real sense, then, the battle for the meaning of Spanish American independence is still being fought through its combatants' printed lives. In a survey of recent biographies of independence figures in Colombia and Venezuela, several themes quickly become apparent. First, biography remains extremely popular with both readers and writers for a broader public (including for children), but rigorous, well-documented, scholarly studies are much fewer in number. Second, the genre remains dominated by studies of the lives of Euro-descended creole men, most of whom were military or political actors, overwhelmingly aligned with patriot side, and resident in urban areas. Third—and directly related to the previous trend—is that most of the biographies are predicated on the concept of glory and glorious achievements. Fourth, biography remains a stubbornly national genre; in research sources and content, there appears to be little cross-fertilization across countries, continents, or languages. And finally, Simón Bolívar remains a towering figure, not only because of the sheer number of biographies devoted to him specifically but also because he casts his long shadow over the life stories of virtually everyone else.

The modern biographical tradition in Spanish America is closely associated with other important 19th century trends: the expanding power of the press, the establishment of national school systems, the creation of a literate public, and the growth of partisan political parties. Life writing was a key part of both the Romantic search for genius that could be encoded in a representative national character and a later turn to positivist history conveyed in Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man" theory of progress (Higgens, 2009). It has been argued that in eras of monumental social or political change, such as Spanish American independence, these factors "coalesced to form veritable force fields in which a heightened biographical consciousness took shape" (Hellbeck, 2009). In comparison to the Anglophone biographical tradition, one scholar has observed that Hispanic biography has remained "tainted by, and tethered to, a politicized nationalism," which tends to produce and reproduce the same histories of heroes and villains known as *historias de bronce* (histories in bronze; Garner, 2018). In the same vein, Will Fowler characterizes the Mexican biographical tradition as "Manichaean" and remarks on the absence of deeply researched, scholarly biographies there, especially for colonial and 19th-century figures. The practice of life writing in Venezuela and Colombia is in a similar state (Fowler, 2018). Venezuelan historian Germán Carrera Damas notes the region's strong and ongoing historiographical tendency to heroicize or demonize its biographical subjects, especially through the practice of conscripting them into service as proxies for commentary on contemporary political figures or to buttress current political agendas. He further recognizes the inherent problem of creating national heroes in a place where leaders often came from somewhere else in terms of region, race, or class (Carrera Damas, 2003). Although there is a recent trend to the production of good scholarly biographies in Argentina, there is much room for academic biographers to investigate the experiences of those who lived through the independence period in Colombia and Venezuela.

2 | THE BIG MAN ON CAMPUS: SIMÓN BOLÍVAR

Bolívarian biographies are so numerous as to be uncountable. They come in all shapes and sizes, pitched at wildly varying audiences: schoolchildren, novelized romances, serious academic studies, richly illustrated picture books, graphic novels, barely disguised political propaganda, films, *telenovelas* (soap operas), and many others. In the nearly two centuries since his death, Bolívar has been cast as a monarchist, a republican, a devout Catholic, an atheist, an aristocrat, a savior of the lower classes, an abolitionist, a dictator, a Marxist, a pro-business entrepreneur, a

forerunner of the Chávez regime, and an embodiment of nearly every other constituency imaginable. His life and legacy is so enormous—and looms so large in the biographical tradition of northern South America—that he appears as a character in virtually everyone's life story, as a friend, foe, or fellow traveler. The details of his life are well known, thanks to the massive personal archive preserved by his most enduring love Manuela Sáenz and his aide-de-camp Daniel Florencio O'Leary. What the liberator's life trajectory actually means, however, may never be settled.

John Lynch is the author of the standard narrative history of Spanish American independence who, in his later years, used his vast knowledge and experience to write biographies of both major continental independence leaders: José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar (Lynch, 2006; Lynch, 2009). Lynch situates his work in the life-and-times tradition of historical biography, characterizing Bolívar as "a rare and original character, whose mind and will were no less factors in historical change than were the social forces of the time." And yet he has written something that is not merely an old-fashioned study in heroism but rather a modern understanding of a complex person. Lynch recognizes the twists and turns of the liberator's career, calling it a "short life but one of extraordinary fullness. He was a revolutionary who freed six countries, an intellectual who argued the principles of national liberation, a general who fought a cruel colonial war." In Lynch's informed opinion, Bolívar was a paradox—"an exceptionally complex man, a liberator who scorned liberalism, a soldier who disparaged militarism, a republican who admired monarchy" (Lynch, 2006). For him, Bolívar was "the realist of the revolution … ever the pragmatist, the politician, who was ready to compromise to achieve his aim; he preferred a successful deal to the constraints of dogma," who advocated "not the best system of government, but the one that is most likely to work." Lynch's forward-looking Bolívar has a firmer moral instinct than Thomas Jefferson on the issue of slavery, and a romantic relationship with Manuela Sáenz that "exemplified a love that was not exploitative and suggests that his views on women did not entirely conform to the culture of the times" (Lynch, 2006). Bolívar was devoted to the ideals of liberty and equality but tried to maintain a semblance of security, property, and stability because he recognized that an entire social structure cannot be changed overnight. Lynch's biography is fair, well documented, readable, and scholarly.

David Bushnell is a U.S. historian who characterizes Bolívar's life quite differently, as one of "liberation and disappointment." Like Lynch, Bushnell recognizes the many contradictions present in the liberator's thought and action, but still asserts that he "today inspires well-nigh universal admiration" (Bushnell, 2004). Unlike Lynch, who explicitly rejects the methods of psychobiography, Bushnell is keen to capture high drama and personalities in order to illuminate aspects that he thinks constitute a universal human character. His book is particularly strong in two ways. First, like others in the *Library of World Biography* series, it is short and built around effective storytelling for the college classroom and the educated general reader. Second, Bushnell seamlessly incorporates historiographical debate into his narrative in a way that is both enlightening and insightful, although he does occasionally use this structure to sidestep taking his own position on some more controversial episodes in the liberator's life. Bushnell's Bolívar is mercurial, hedonistic, comfortable with the use of violence and had been "seeking affirmation of his dictatorial powers" from the earliest days. He may have had an "obsessive fear" of *pardocracy* (rule by mixed race folk), but he also opposed slavery and did not believe that inherent differences existed among humans (Bushnell, 2004).

Lester Langley's career has focused on exploring the hemispheric history of the Age of Revolutions. From this comparative perspective, he suggests that Bolívar, not Washington, might be more universally relevant both as a revolutionary inspiration and as a salutary warning for governments and peoples in the 21st century. Ultimately, he concludes, it was Bolívar's need for strong executive and regional (even continental) unity, as well as his decision to mobilize slaves and people of color that "transformed the Venezuelan rebel into the American revolutionary" (Langley, 2009). Langley's biography is predicated on a north/south hemispheric comparison—oftentimes explicit—between the lives and careers of George Washington and Simón Bolívar and is informed by the author's interest in the way North Americans saw events at time. For example, Langley compares Bolívar's speech to the Admirable Congress of 1830 to Washington's farewell address of 1796 (Langley, 2009). Langley tends to offer a traditional view of "the quintessential man of action" and identify the phases of his life with glorious action-hero chapter titles: The Rebel, The Revolutionary, The Liberator, The Victor. His Bolívar is a distinctly U.S.-inflected one, a revolutionary who focused on color not class, and whose dictatorship was understandable because it arose out of necessity (Langley, 2009).

Marie Arana is a Washington-based writer of fiction and personal memoir who moved into serious historical writing and is herself a Peruvian descendent of a royalist general who defeated the Battle of Ayacucho. She is the author of a recent popular trade biography, available in both English and Spanish, that has received considerable publicity. Striking a balance between engaged storytelling and serious research, Arana used archival sources and printed primary and secondary sources to create her version of the liberator's life; she even took the novel step of acquiring a DNA swab from a descendent of Bolívar's sister which supposedly indicated that the family has no Afro-descended bloodline (Arana, 2013). Arana's Bolívar is intense, charismatic, larger than life, but also deeply flawed. He was not actually a soldier but a man "with little more than will and a genius for leadership, [who] freed much of Spanish America and laid out his dream for a unified continent." She makes the sweeping observation that "Latin Americans have learned how to accept human imperfections in their leaders. Bolívar taught them how." Her novelist's pen sketches a life story for the ages, dramatically pronouncing that Bolívar acted with "[s]tamina that is arguably unmatched in history. He remade the world."

Venezuelans, of course, write a lot about Bolívar because Bolívar was theirs. Elías Pino Iturrieta is a prolific historian of the independence era whose study of the liberator casts him, somewhat sardonically, as "the divine Bolívar" (Pino Iturrieta, 2016). Building on the groundwork set out by Germán Carrera Damas in his 1969 book *El culto de Bolívar*, as well as recent research on the construction of republican heroes as part of a new secular religion, Pino Iturrieta's biography interlaces both the chronological story of Bolívar's life and a careful critique of the myth that developed alongside it. His chapter titles playfully harken back to the medieval biographical genre of saints' lives, among them are The Pontifical Heights, The Humble Sacristans, The Chosen One and the Sin, The Shared Apotheosis, The Curious Purgatory, the Auto-da-Fé, The Crown's Blessing, The Name of the Father. Pino Iturrieta is dubious about the tendency to overestimate the power and significance of individuals in history, even as he recognizes the outsized role Bolívar's persona has played in the formation of his own country's national identity.

3 | THE OLDER KIDS: SCIENTISTS AND THE PRECURSOR (MUTIS, HUMBOLDT, AND MIRANDA)

Biographical treatments of the precursors to the independence movements in Colombia and Venezuela overwhelmingly frame their lives in the context of their relationship to Europe. Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in the lives of Enlightenment scientists who came to work in New Granada, notably José Celestino Mutis and Alexander von Humboldt, both of whom made extensive tours to document not only its flora and fauna but also its people and pre-independence politics. Although Mutis lived in Bogotá for 48 years and undertook all his mature work there, biographers can still dismiss the viceroyalty as "an intellectual vacuum" even as Mutis' own diaries indicate the degree to which he relied on the information, practices, and insights of locals such as Gregorio Londoño and Mariana Dávila (Wilson & Gómez Durán, 2010). Similarly, Laura Dassow Wells describes Humboldt as the "first environmentalist," and Aaron Sachs characterizes him as "the first ecologist" (Sachs, 2007; Wells, 2009). Andrea Wulf refashions Humboldt as a modern environmental hero whose views "sound alarmingly prophetic" (Wulf, 2015). These biographical studies—like nearly all stories of Enlightenment scientists in New Granada whose methods, presence, and ideas contributed the revolutionary ferment on the eve of independence—privilege the European visitors' output and do not give enough credit to the local context and people from whom they took their knowledge.

Precursor Francisco de Miranda has been a popular subject for biographers for more than 200 years. His name has been used for a major thoroughfare in Caracas, a Venezuelan state, an airport, and countless schools, hospitals, towns, and person namesakes. Miranda's dramatic and celebrity-filled life story is known not just to Colombians and Venezuelans, but throughout Latin America. It should not be surprising, then, that authors continue to revisit his life story even though its outlines are well known. Recent authors have characterized the precursor as "a sacrificial hero" (Anselin, 2018), "a sentimental nomad" (Chirinos, 2017), "the celebrity hero of exilic romance" (Miranda, 2016), "the eternal revolutionary" (Martínez Hoyos, 2016), and a "pilgrim of liberty" (Gómez García, 2016). I myself have called it "a transatlantic life in the Age of Revolution." (Racine, 2003). Miranda was all these things and more.

Venezuelan historian Inés Quintero has written two biographies of Miranda, a short, popular one for the Biblioteca Biográfica Venezolana series and then an expanded, full-length scholarly version 8 years later. Although the narrative employs a chronological structure, Quintero explicitly emphasizes his personal and emotional experiences rather than his public activities. She opens with a relatively detailed discussion of the well-known and contentious case that the Venezuelan elite launched against Miranda's father's social status, charging him with having a racially mixed background and therefore not eligible for a prominent officer's rank in the voluntary militia. Having previously produced an excellent study of Caracas' elite *mantuano* society, Quintero is uniquely positioned to explain how this rejection based on his father's questionable whiteness was a defining trauma in his early years (Quintero, 2014). In her telling, Miranda's true biography begins in 1771 as he sailed away from Venezuela to a new life in Europe with little loyalty, fondness, or attachment to his childhood reality. What follows is a breezy, eminently human account of Miranda's life and relationships, based to a large extend on diaries and private correspondence from his voluminous personal archive at the Academia de la Historia in Caracas. Quintero addresses three of the most controversial episodes in Miranda's life with fairness and equanimity: the precursor's ascent to wartime dictator status and his eventual capitulation to the royalists in 1812, Simón Bolívar's murky involvement in that event, which resulted in Miranda's capture and imprisonment and, finally, Miranda's attempt to export 22,000 pesos of the Venezuelan national treasury to the English colonies along with his own possessions.

Another Venezuelan biographer, Alfonso Rumazo González, rejects the characterization of Miranda as any kind of precursor at all. He considers that term to be reductive and one that "amputates" the full scope of Miranda's varied life (Rumazo González, 2006). Instead, he recasts Miranda as a "proto-leader, a primary Leader, one of pre-eminence"—an opinion which may be a distinction without a difference. Sponsored by the Chávez government and underwritten by state enterprises, the cultural arm of the National Telecommunications Commission got permission from the author's heirs to republish this work "so that all Venezuela and America know their true history. The history of our land, which is the history of our liberators… In them our dreams and our ideals of today are founded." He recasts the 1806 Leander Expedition not as the disaster that it was, but as a successful first shot against the Spanish monarchy, one that fatally wounded the colonial order (Rumazo González, 2006). The biography is typical of the genre of heroic accounts reliant almost wholly on Spanish language, secondary sources produced between 1930 and 1970, and which has enjoyed a resurgence in the highly politicized 21st century context when service to an ideological cause—not factual accuracy—is the primary concern.

4 | THE TOUGH GUY: SOLDIER AND FIGHTER (MORILLO)

Obviously, heroic patriot military figures dominate among biographers of the wars of independence. Royalists' lives are rare, but one outstanding figure has been studied in great detail, partly because of the enormous personal archive he bequeathed to the Real Academia de Historia in Madrid. Gonzalo M. Quintero Saravia's version aims to put Morillo's career and attitudes in the context of an Atlantic crisis and a Spanish civil war; in his opinion, Morillo was more than just a royalist general, he was an emblematic figure whose loyalty to the royalist cause derived from his own personal success rising from rural poverty in Fuenteseca to prominence within the late colonial system. Morillo's life trajectory illustrates both the complexity of reasons why a Spaniard might choose to participate on one side or another and also the rise of *caudillismo* (strongman politics) as a phenomenon (Quintero Saravia, 2017).

Nevertheless, the biography does not escape the gravitational force field that is Simón Bolívar. It opens with an introductory chapter set around the fateful meeting of Morillo and Bolívar during the armistice discussions in November 27–28, 1820. Quintero Saravia tries to capture the frustration that Morillo felt when the new liberal regime in Madrid did not understand the war and he could not explain it to them; as a loyal agent, he had to follow instructions for armistice he thought were "absolutely wrong." Morillo relished his pomp and symbols of power as earned, a stark contrast to Bolívar who cared nothing for baubles or adornments (Quintero Saravia, 2017). The biography then reverts to a standard chronological structure and does a good job of showing Morillo's consistent rise up

the military ranks through his own successful performance at important battles at Sardinia, Cape St. Vincent, Bailén, Vigo, Sampayo, and Vitoria. After being appointed to the head of the expeditionary force in Venezuela, Morillo consistently recommended a conciliatory policy to Ferdinand VII who just as consistently rejected his advice. In fact, Quintero Saravia argues, Morillo was not the infamous "exterminating angel" of the 19th century liberal accounts, rather he preferred to offer pardons, and alleviate suffering in order to convince locals to join his side. He concludes that Morillo had a brilliant military mind who recognized the profound regionalism of New Granada, but who ultimately lacked the political talent to achieve his mandate. As Quintero Saravia puts it, "a Bolívar was needed to meet Bolívar" (Quintero Saravia, 2017).

5 | THE BOOKWORMS (ZEA, FERNÁNDEZ MADRID)

Diana Soto Arango set out to rehabilitate Francisco Antonio Zea, a controversial figure in Colombian history who served Ferdinand VII at Bayonne in 1808 and later contracted the disastrous London loan of 1822 that seriously undermined the country's economic recovery for decades after independence. In her opinion, he has been unfairly maligned. Zea was a modern-minded man of science, an intellectual, devoted to plants and the advancement of knowledge, a man who even the Inquisition cleared as "a mere botanist." In an assertion not likely to convince economic historians, she says Zea's ruinous London loan was actually "a win-win situation [in which he was] trying to reestablish Colombia's credit and help the cause of recognition" (Soto Arango, 2000). Similarly deflecting the charge that Zea was an *afrancesado* (frenchified intellectual) who collaborated with Napoleon, Soto Arango blames the petty jealousies of his contemporaries. Soto Arango's biography began as her doctoral dissertation at CSIC-Madrid and was published in their history of science series called Theatrum Naturæ, which may explain why it intensely foregrounds Zea's research and career at Madrid's Jardín Botánico and downplays nearly all of his political work. Zea was associated with Antonio Nariño's radical *tertulia* (salon or discussion group) in the 1790s, worked on Napoleon's Bayona Constitution of 1808, edited the patriot newspaper *El Correo del Orinoco*, and was present at the Congress of Angostura in 1819 as the first Vice-President of Colombia serving alongside President Bolívar. Soto Arango laments that Zea has gone from "glory to being forgotten" (Soto Arango, 2000). This is not likely to become the standard interpretation.

José Fernández Madrid was a scientist, medical doctor, politician, poet, diplomat, and devoted friend of Bolívar. He is strongly associated with Cartagena, where his statue is placed in a tree-lined plaza in the old town. Colombian scholar Jairo Solano Alonso wrote a doctoral dissertation on Fernández Madrid at Seville's Universidad de Pablo de Olavide where it received Extraordinary Thesis Prize in 2011. As a biographer, Solano Alonso wanted to push back against the subgenre of enlightened geniuses by characterizing Fernandez Madrid as "an intellectual who acted: and by situating him within matrix of 'knowledge, power and society'" (Solano Alonso, 2012). He considers enlightened creoles as "participants in a common experience" who "used scientific models but also adapt to local conditions and generated new forms of understanding and practice." The author emphasizes Fernández Madrid's distance from power centered in Bogotá, his identification with the popular classes, and his Andalusian and Afro-Caribbean heritage as a central part of his identity (Solano Alonso, 2014). The biography follows a fairly traditional structure, including an extensive chapter on his relationship with Bolívar. For Solano Alonso, Fernández Madrid was "above all a writer and a patriot who used his pen in the service of the movements of his time," a modern intellect solidly anchored in science but who also evinced an engaged romantic humanism that distinguished him from the other protagonists of his day.

6 | THE CHEERING SECTION: WOMEN

Not surprisingly, there are few scholarly biographies of individual women, and those that are written tend to focus on relatives of the great heroes, with a notable focus on the women in Bolívar's circle such as his sister María

Antonia Bolívar and his last great love Manuela Sáenz. There are many short, anecdotal popular histories of patriot heroines, most notably Policarpa Salavarrieta ("La Pola"), the young seamstress–spy who aided New Granadan patriot cause and was executed in 1817, and Antonia Santos Plata who led a patriot resistance movement. The gap is not for lack of subjects or sources, however, as specialized studies on gender in the independence era written by Guiomar Dueñas Vargas (2015), Arlene Díaz (2004), Rebecca Earle (2000), and Evelyn Cherpak (1978) have shown.

María Antonia Bolívar was a fascinating and strong-willed character in her own right. She was a staunch royalist who deployed her fortune and considerable political talents to preserve her family's status, wealth, and property in a time of bloody transition. Inés Quintero's biography uses newly unearthed documents and common sense insights to debunk the mythic version of Bolívar's sister as a loyal and devoted friend. Instead, she paints a picture of a ruthless, fiercely independent woman who effectively understood the levers of power in her society and manipulated them effectively to advance her own interests. As an antidote to the tendency to see independence era as dominated by male patriots, Quintero shows readers "the complexity of our emergence as an independent nation through the lens of an exceptional protagonist: María Antonia Bolívar, principal creole lady and the Liberator's sister" (Quintero, 2003). In contrast to her famous patriot brother, María Antonia "categorically rejected" independence from the start; after 1812, she actively hid royalists to protect them from patriot vengeance, launched a flurry of petitions to the Crown in which she downplayed her connection to her brother, and joined the flood of royalist refugees in Caribbean exile. Quintero's characterization is clearest in her extensive analysis of María Antonia's handling of the Bolívar family fortune. She got herself confirmed as the administrator of their accounts, spend the 1820s in litigation, and regularly overruled both her brother's judgment and his desperate pleas. This biography is important, not least because it elevates the profile of women and royalists but also because it does what all good biographies should do: humanize an era by revealing trends and patterns through the lens of a single individual. Although María Antonia Bolívar's life can never be disentangled from that of her brother, Quintero shows her to have been a forceful businesswoman with her own opinions and whose counsel the liberator often sought (Quintero, 2003). In a sense, the siblings' oscillation between violent disagreement and grudging cooperation is a metaphor for the emerging nation as a whole.

Bolívar's personal and political partner Manuela Sáenz, on the other hand, was as fierce a patriot as his own sister had been a royalist. She has been the subject of countless breathless biographies, accounts that sublimate her life as a devoted helpmate or scandalous lover to the great liberator (Paz Otero, 2006; Von Hagen, 1952). It is standard to frame Sáenz's life as a tragic romantic heroine who suffered exiles and privations in service of her country and her man (Mora, 2012; Tucker, 2018). More recently, historians of gender have tried to understand Sáenz as an individual actor in her own right. Sarah Chambers emphasizes Sáenz's active role in the creation of the new order's early foundation myths during the decades after Bolívar's untimely death. María Mogollón Carbón and Ximena Narváez identify some of the prejudices that have worked against Sáenz in the standard heroic Venezuela national histories: her gender, her Ecuadorian nationality, and her unmarried status (Chambers, 2001; Hennes, 2005; Mogollón Cobo & Narváez Yar, 1997). Pamela Murray also recognizes that a "deeply conservative male gender bias" in European and South American historiography have tended to downplay Sáenz's "bravery, quick-thinking, and the beatings that she took" (Murray, 2008). Instead, their works fall into two camps, those that see her as a mannish, disreputable, low-class nymphomaniac, and others that cast her as a beautiful and devoted lover who tended her hero and supported him in hard times (Murray, 2001).

Yet even in Murray's book-length biography, Sáenz cannot escape the liberator's orbit; her title, *For Glory and Bolívar*, even echoes a marriage vow. Murray's intense, archive-based research leads her to agree that Sáenz was Bolívar's "personal archivist, confidante, and … his most ardent defender" but goes further and uses the tools of the new biography genre to situate Sáenz's experience in the context of a new liberal-republican vocabulary and the challenges faced by women in the transition between regimes (Murray, 2008). In fact, Murray argues through her study of Sáenz's life that women were "far from strangers to the larger world of power and influence"; she was an entrepreneur, an active fundraiser for the patriot cause, a fierce defender of Bolívar's interests and memory, and a person willing to buck convention by leaving her husband, attaching herself to armed forces as an archivist and

fighter, and even smoking cigars. In this book, Sáenz and Bolívar both appear as recognizably human, capable of great love and great cruelty, complete with senses of humor, jealousy, mundane domestic concerns, and physical bodies. Furthermore, she notes that Manuela Sáenz's life did not end with Bolívar's death in 1830. She survived for 26 more years, mostly in poverty and obscurity, but still treated as a threat by powerful men who recognized that her connection to the liberator's legacy conferred glory and political weight.

Biographies of women during Venezuela and Colombia's independence era tend to be limited to heavily mythologized, well-known lives of a limited number of outstanding figures. On the occasion of the 2010 bicentennial, Enrique Santos Molano offered a readable popular history based on secondary sources and contemporary newspapers as a gesture of "gratitude to heroic Colombian women through the ages" (Santos Molano, 2010). The book has four sections, two of which cover the lives of women in shared movements: "Las pasionaras de Charalá y Socorro"—women named Ana María Argüello, Toribia Verdugo, Manuela Beltrán, and la *Negra* Magdalena—and the "Señoras en Contravía"—women named Magdalena Ortega, Bárbara Forero, and Rafaela Isazi. The two final chapters each are devoted to a single, overwhelmingly famous wartime heroine: *la maestra coraje* Policarpa Salavarrieta and *la guerrillera* Antonia Santos Plata, a woman who organized and led patriot resistance among the regular folk in the province of El Socorro and was executed by the royalists in 1819. There is an nine-page appendix of names of women who were "immolated in the cause of independence." It is more suggestive than scholarly, but at least it is a start.

7 | THE SQUAD: COLLECTIVE AND GROUP BIOGRAPHIES

Not surprisingly, single-volume collections of short biographies are most effective when treating groups of people with a strong shared identity. It could be an administrative or bureaucratic role, membership in a club or a battalion, or perhaps their participation in an identifiable movement. Prosopographical studies can take many forms ranging from the encyclopedic and descriptive to the sociological and analytical. There are a few recent entrants in this category that are worth noticing for their contents or their methodology. Jean Carlos Brizuela and José Alberto Olivar co-edited a volume of short biographies using the metaphor of "attics and basements of the republican edifice" (Brizuela & Olivar, 2012). The collection includes obvious and well-known figures from national affairs, including Andrés Bello (by Carlos Alarico Gómez), Francisco Javier Yanes (Jean Carlos Brizuela), Juan Germán Roscio (Suzuky Margarita Gómez Castillo), William Burke (Domingo Irwin), Miguel José Sanz (Frank Rodríguez), and Francisco Espejo (Andrés Cortez). It makes a more valuable contribution when it puts forward the lives of lesser known regional figures: José Jacobo Garcés of the province of Coro (Isaac López), a deputy from San Carlos named Francisco Hernández (José Daniel Chirinos), and a medical doctor from Barquisimeto, José Ángel de Álamo (Froilán Ramos Rodríguez). The editors also highlight the role of the Catholic Church and its representatives with the inclusion of a few religious figures: prelate from Guanare José Vicente de Unda García (Emad Aboaasi El Nimer), Monseñor Mariano de Talavera y Garcés (María Soledad Hernández Bencid), and parish priest Salvador Delgado Espinoza (Manuel Alberto Donís Ríos).

In a similar, though more commercial vein, the *Biblioteca Biográfica Venezolana* (Venezuela Biographical Library) is a joint project of the Editora El Nacional and the Fundación Bancaribe to publish short, readable life stories of important people in Venezuelan public life, including politicians, writers, artists, soldiers, and heroic figures. Obviously, the wars of independence generated many subjects whose exemplary lives appear in this collection. Although the books are aimed toward a general audience and vary in quality of research and prose style, they nevertheless represent a noteworthy contribution to Venezuelan life writing. In chronological order, the list includes José Tomás Boves (by Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, 2005), Simón Rodríguez (Rafael Fernández Heres, 2005), Ramón Ignacio Méndez (Manuel Donís Ríos, 2005), Antonio José de Sucre (Alberto Silva Aristeguieta, 2005), Francisco de Miranda (Inés Quintero, 2006), Carlos Soublette (Magaly Burguera, 2006), José Rafael Revenga (Carlos Hernández Delfino, 2006), José María Vargas (Carolina Guerrero, 2006), Daniel Florencio O'Leary (Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, 2006), José Tadeo

Monagas (Carlos Alarico Gómez 2006), Andrés Bello (Pedro Cunill Grau, 2006), Agustín Codazzi (Juan José Pérez Rancel, 2006)

Feliciano Montenegro (Napoleón Franceschi González, 2006), Vicente Salías (Juan Carlos Reyes, 2007), José Cortés Madariaga (Antonio Sánchez García, 2007), José Antonio Páez (Ramón Hernández, 2007), Juan Germán Roscio (Carlos Pernalete, 2008), Fermín Toro (Rafael Hernández Torres, 2008–2009), Simón Bolívar (Elías Pino Iturrieta, 2009), Santiago Mariño (Manuel Donís Ríos, 2009), Manuel Palacio Fajardo (Elsa Cardozo, 2009–2010), Cristobal Mendoza (Eduardo Garcia Peña, 2009–2010), Miguel Peña (Antonio Echarrí Bolívar, 2011), Rafael Urdaneta (Arlene Urdaneta Quintero, 2011), Pedro Gual (José Alberto Olivar, 2011), Tomás Lander (Migdalia Lezama, 2011), Luis López Méndez (Edgardo Mondolfi Gudat, 2011), Miguel José Sanz (David Ruiz Chataing, 2011), and Santos Michelena (Simón Alberto Consalvi, 2012). All of the subjects are male, most operated at a national or international level, engaged in political or military exploits, and were on the winning patriot side. It would be valuable to recover and include the individual lived experiences of women, people of color, royalists, and those who operated outside the main urban areas.

Finally, there are two innovative academic studies that take a collective biography approach and deserve special mention. First, Matthew Brown's book, *The Struggle for Power in Post-Independence Colombia and Venezuela* traces the lives of the participants of the Battle of El Santuario which took place on October 17, 1829 (Brown, 2012). For two hours, the Colombian Army (including several British officers) fought a rebellious group of disaffected soldiers based in the Antioquía region. By Brown's tally, there were 1,150 men participants, with 370 in the ranks of the regional force and 780 fighting for the central government. Brown's collective biography focuses on some of the main figures about whom it is possible to reconstruct much of their lives, but he explicitly recognizes that there were many *campesinos*, townsfolk, women, and other participants whose experiences and contributions are not fully reflected in the documentary record. In this endeavor, he set out to "pay great attention to personal relationships, preferring to treat the El Santuario veterans as individuals," arguing that "[b]y reconstructing the lives of the El Santuario veterans, and placing them alongside one another, we can get some idea of the extent of their personal networks and how these overlapped with national and imperial spaces" (Brown, 2012). Brown calls this matrix of political, economic, military, and family relationships an "imperial web." For the Antioquian side, he includes José María Córdova, Salvador Córdova, Anselmo Pineda, Francisco Giraldo, and Braulio Henao; and on the Colombian Army, the main subjects are Daniel Florencio O'Leary, Carlo Castelli, Rupert Hand, Thomas Murray, Francisco Urdaneta, Carmelo Fernández, and Dabney O. Carr. The book is meticulously researched and methodologically innovative.

Manuel Pareja Ortiz has also undertaken a work of collective biography focusing on the people, events, and major texts of July 20, 1810. On that date, a revolt in Santa Fe de Bogotá led to the creation of a self-governing junta and, eventually, to a declaration of independence from Spanish colonial rule. He has compiled the details of 248 people linked to the day's events with the aim of reassessing the nature and meaning of that foundational event and fortifying a new civic spirit at the bicentennial (Pareja Ortiz, 2013). By using methodology drawn from sociology and demography, the author draws out some surprising facts. First, July 20, 1810, was "not just a Santa Fe de Bogotá thing – more than half the actors came from other provinces of the Viceroyalty." Second, it unleashed a process that took longer than a single glorious day; in fact, events extended at least until August 15 when the viceroy was imprisoned. Among Pareja Ortiz's calculations, of the 248 participants, 154 were born in New Granada, 76 were born in Spain (in 13 different provinces), and the origins of five people remain unknown. Ninety-three percent were ethnically Hispanic and a very high proportion were first-generation creoles. In fact, the Junta de Santa Fe comprised 90% creoles, which is almost the mirror opposite of the Spanish high bureaucracy, 80% of which had been dominated by Europeans. In terms of their occupations, of the 248 participants, 42% were lawyers, 17% were hacienda owners, and 13% were clerics. One of the suggestive details to emerge is that only 52% of the participants were resident in Santa Fe (Pareja Ortiz, 2013).

The second half of the book focuses on the *chisperos*, a group that Pareja Ortiz feels is famous yet little understood. They take their name from a word meaning rumor or gossip, and were highly mobile couriers, transport workers, communication agents, and others who carried news and rumors from cities out to the countryside and who often stoked agitation. Chapter three discusses the lives and actions of some of the major chisperos: Ignacio de Herrera Vergara, Juan Nepomuceno Azuero, José María Carbonell, Manuel García, Felipe Miró, Sinforoso Mutis Consuegra,

Joaquín Pontón, Juan Manuel Ramírez, and Francisco Xavier Serrano Gómez. As part of one of the chapters on the chisperos, Pareja Ortiz finds that the word *pueblo* (people or town) was used over 500 times in print and printed versions of speech acts. Indeed, the importance of idea of the people among the statesman, intellectuals, and politicians—and judging by the evidence presented in this prosopography, the actual participation of regular people—was central to their vision of the July 20 events. And yet, although the introduction notes that many women were involved in the events of July–August 1810, including their work as chisperos, they are barely mentioned in the rest of the book.

Biography is one of the oldest, most enduring and popular historical genres. Publishers know it sells well because the appetite for life stories among general readers is consistent and nearly limitless. In the midst of the ongoing bicentennial celebrations, there certainly is no shortage of commercial, popular biographies of Colombia and Venezuela's independence leaders. In contrast, the number of deeply researched scholarly biographies remains quite low and still focused on the lives of well-known, Euro-descended patriot men who served in military, political, or intellectual roles. There are understandable methodological reasons for this state of scholarship: the size and location of substantial sets of personal papers, the institutional and demographic characteristics from which academic biographies have previously been generated, and, also, the conservative nature of publishers who prefer to market to an already-primed audience. But one other major distortion in the field of life writing is the blessing and curse of having the towering figure of the liberator as one of their own. It seems that everyone, then and now, was either a friend or an enemy of Simón Bolívar.

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