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The Unexpected Literary Archive

When people ask me what I study, I always hesitate. I used to say “Spanish,” and people thought it was the language; then I started to say “Spanish Literature,” which is more accurate, but not entirely true, because I also study philosophy, history, law, cultural studies, cinema, and even architecture and religion. In an interdisciplinary program like the one at UC Berkeley, the world becomes my archive. Sometimes a random building in Montevideo, Uruguay has such a long and fascinating story that shows the British influence in the late 18th century, or an empty factory in the middle of downtown shows a more prosperous past.

Having said this, I am a student in a literature program, which basically means two things: I can study “the classics,” the books I find in a library, or I can try to discover unpublished material. Finding new material can be difficult but very rewarding. I am currently exploring unpublished newspapers from a time when Uruguay and Argentina used to be one country, so it is interesting to see how the national discourse changes after and before the Uruguayan independence. At the same time, a newspaper shows the way people used to think about their current issues: how history was understood at the time. Finding this work is so relevant to a student like me because being so close to the archive teaches you how to understand the sources in their context, without forgetting their own importance.

Big ideas and bigger cultural changes are made out of material, concrete things: articles, books, conferences, laws, street protest, etc. So, sometimes an article in a newspaper can show you an intellectual debate but also can change the way we see things about the past. For example, I found an article that describes how after independence, Uruguay decided to rename certain streets and public places that had Argentinian names. This caused an ongoing debate for almost a year in the newspapers: some believed that the new country needed a new way of thinking about its past and its future, but some others saw this as a natural process that did not need a clear cut from the past. The way we name things in the public sphere could show what is going on in a more fundamental place. As the national discourse shapes itself, the consequences change in relation to the different past of the nation. In this case, the archive shows two clear tendencies: embracing the past or trying to forget it.

Another article explored the idea of a transition period, in which Uruguay could take Argentinian citizenship, even if they decided to be a different country. Other common problems were: the currency, the flag, the national symbols, and one that today still seems to be very important: who was going to be the national hero, the founding father. José Gervacio Artigas was very quickly chosen as the figure that was going to become the embodiment of the nation. There is a very important thing here to be said: Artigas did fight for Uruguayan independence against Spain, but in the context of a much larger project, one that included almost one third of what Argentina is today. When that idea failed, Artigas chose to leave Uruguay, and he never went back (consider the fact that he died almost 30 years later).

Some newspapers show the “problem” of having a national hero who left: this controversy that shakes the core of the entire national symbol of Uruguay as an independent country, was already challenged by the newspapers at the end of the 19th century. This issue is still very controversial today: there are many recent publications that try to understand the controversy around the national hero and the effects for the country. I found that this archive was not consulted by many of the current Uruguayan writers, who could have benefited from those debates. I will address this issue in my qualifying exams in more depth.

The literary newspapers around the same years had the difficulty of establishing a nonexistent “Uruguayan literary cannon.” The cultural tradition of having a national literature, different from another, is necessary to show not only local talent but to prove the difference from other nations. What the country had to offer to world has a common problem found those years. The first Uruguayan collection of poetry (*El parnaso oriental*) had almost half of Argentinean writers, which at the time did not seem to be a problem, but when Uruguay tries to find its own literary tradition, the most emblematic work has half not theirs. This issue is found in several newspapers and articles: the need for a national literature, different from Argentina. At the turn of the century, Uruguayan literature starts to be part of an on going process of re-discovering what the nation is and means to the world.

I was fascinated to see how this unpublished material is the basis of the still ongoing questionings of the entity of being from one country or another. The construction of national identity at the end of the 19th century is very clear in all Latin America. Every country has to show its uniqueness, and their relationship with the rest of Latin America, but also to Europe and the United States. As I mentioned before, the concrete material things like a newspaper and the debates around how and why are we a nation in the first place, shows this important process.

This archive is getting more recognition as Uruguayan historians try to reconstruct the process of Uruguay becoming an independent country. With a group of graduate students at the Universidad de la República in Uruguay, we are sharing this archive to the world. I am very confident that this project will ask new questions about the way that Latin America is understood today.

I am very thankful for your help in funding this project. I will be able to share the new website with this uploaded material soon.

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