Illustrating American Power and Privilege: Images of Mexico as the Other in Albert S. Evans’s *Our Sister Republic: A Gala Trip Through Tropical Mexico in 1869-70*.

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Abstract
After the U.S.-Mexican War, internal power struggles weakened the Mexico, and France forcefully established a government in 1862. In 1867, the United States (U.S.) invoked the Monroe Doctrine and placed military and political support behind exiled Mexican president Benito Juárez. This political action pressured France to withdraw from Mexico and demonstrated how the U.S. exercised on-going hegemony over Mexico. This paper argues the images and text in Albert S. Evans’s *Our Sister Republic: A Gala Trip Through Tropical Mexico in 1869-70* misrepresented Mexico to justify American imperialism. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, the images are closely examined and analyzed for what they reveal about U.S. relations with Mexico.

Keywords
Albert S. Evans — Texas — Mexico — Monroe Doctrine

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Introduction

After the U.S.-Mexican War, internal power struggles weakened the Mexico, and France forcefully established a government in 1862. In 1867, the United States (U.S.) invoked the Monroe Doctrine and placed military and political support behind exiled Mexican president Benito Juárez. This political action pressured France to withdraw from Mexico and demonstrated how the U.S. exercised on-going hegemony over Mexico. This paper argues the images and text in Albert S. Evans’s *Our Sister Republic: A Gala Trip Through Tropical Mexico in 1869-70* misrepresented Mexico to justify American imperialism. Through the lens of postcolonial theory, the images are closely examined and analyzed for what they reveal about U.S. relations with Mexico.

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In order to accomplish this goal, this paper asks the following questions: In what way does *Our Sister Republic* reflect political and social relations between the U.S. and Mexico at the time? How does Evans characterize Mexico to gain popular American support for U.S. policies in Mexico? How does Evans describe American concepts of Mexican character? How do the images portray and justify U.S. hegemony over Mexico?

The following paragraphs employ an art historical object-based research method to analyze *Our Sister Republic*. My analysis uses the theoretical framework of postcolonial theory, drawing on Edward Said’s analysis of the systematic approach through which the West defined people of the East and the resulting unequal power relationship [1, 2]. This approach is relevant for the study of Evans’s travel narrative and illustrations because his description of Mexico in 1869-70 was written through the filter of his prejudice and the exercise of his American power and privilege.
Using the critical lens of postcolonial theory, my research method consists of comparing primary and secondary sources to Evans’s travel narrative to debate how his text and illustrations justify American imperialism. This research project uses primary sources, the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny, to illustrate how U.S. policies concerned Mexico in the late 1860s. Secondary sources, including articles on Americans’ view of Mexico, provides a framework to understand how nineteenth century social concepts influenced and supported U.S. political and economic policies toward Mexico. Utilizing this knowledge, this research project will compare and analyze Evans’s travel narrative to primary and secondary sources and shed light on mid-nineteenth-century U.S. interactions with Mexico. Evans’s illustrations visually embody justification for racism, the stereotype of Mexican incompetence, and the perceived need for U.S. protection of Mexico.

1. Evans’s Our Sister Republic

Our Sister Republic: A Gala Trip through Tropical Mexico in 1869-70 is a nineteenth-century travel narrative. It lists two subtitles: Adventure and Sight-seeing in the Land of the Aztecs, with Picturesque Descriptions of the Country and the People, and Reminiscences of the Empire and its Downfall. Albert S. Evans wrote the book in Mexico based on his observations as a member of former Secretary of State William H. Seward’s travel party in 1869-70. Published by the Hartford, Connecticut Colombian Book Company in 1870, the book contains 520 pages including sixty-four illustrations engraved by Fay and Cox [3].

The Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny shaped the hegemonic relationship between the U.S. and Mexico during the nineteenth century. Protecting a firm border and establishing centralized control evaded Mexico in the time between independence and the U.S.-Mexico War. Mexico lost nearly half of its territory when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848. Throughout the next decade, political power fluctuated between the Conservatives and Liberals. Backed by the U.S., Benito Juárez became president in 1861 and in an effort to stabilize Mexico’s economy, he canceled all foreign debt owed by Mexico. Enraged, France invaded Veracruz and established Maximillian von Hapsburg as emperor [4]. Invoking the Monroe Doctrine, in which the U.S. argued, “We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the U.S. and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety” [5]. The U.S. exerted political and military pressure behind Benito Juárez. With this support, he defeated Maximilian. After 1867, the U.S. and Mexico entered a peaceful yet unequal relationship marked by increased U.S. imperial interest in Mexico’s labor pool and natural resources.

Nineteenth-century American media portrayed Mexico as incapable of self-rule, racially inferior, and lazy. Travel literature, novels and magazines exposed the American public to these enduring concepts of Mexican character. The American public viewed U.S. presence as economically and morally beneficial to Mexico even during the U.S.-Mexican War [6]. At this critical time, John L. O’Sullivan promoted and spread the idea of Manifest Destiny in his 1845 article, Annexation. He claimed nations could not interfere with the U.S. arguing their inherent right as, “fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions” [7]. Supporting his outright call for the provident right of Manifest Destiny, the mass circulation of newspapers, dime novels and popular literature promoted the U.S. as more powerful, stronger, racially superior, and better leaders. These themes were told through characters and stories of rescue and dominance set in plantations, haciendas, and factories [8]. Travel literature recounted the Mexican lack of character and intellect [6]. Their images enhanced the American perception of Mexico and often represented the U.S. as a protectorate and Mexico as the Other [9]. Illustrations reiterated Mexico’s need for U.S. guidance by illustrating crumbling ancient civilizations, little infrastructure and the lack of modern amenities.

In analysis of Albert S. Evans’s Our Sister Republic, my research has relied on studies of travel literature, image analysis of nineteenth-century Mexico and Latin America, and political discourse scholarship. This broader topic is studied by Raymund A. Paredes’s “The Mexican Image in American Travel Literature, 1831-1869” which determined that negatively portraying Mexicans justified the U.S.’ superiority during a time of national expansion [6]. Roger Balm’s “Expeditionary Art: An Appraisal,” on the other hand, reveals that representation of ethnographic subject matter characterized the cultural environment [9]. John Mason Hart’s Empire and Revolution: The Americans in Mexico since the Civil War considered the politics of subjugation between the U.S. and Mexico [10]. These studies of travel literature and prejudice helped me to determine why Evans portrays Mexicans are inferior in Our Sister Republic.

Finally, William E. Lenz’s “Seeing the Maya in the Amer-
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2. Illustrations in *Our Sister Republic*

*Our Sister Republic* contains sixty-four illustrations, with four depicting Anglo men and Mexican laborers and nineteen representing Mexicans in figure studies. Analysis reveals several strategies or tropes the author employed to shape the image of the Mexican he discussed. My research reveals that a group of illustrations in *Our Sister Republic* present Mexico as inferior to the U.S. by portraying Mexicans in lesser positions which depicted them as a different Other. These images portray Americans as large powerful figures and Mexicans as diminutive grateful figures. An example of this type of image is Hon. William H. Seward Traveling in Mexico (Figure 1). Mr. Seward’s palanquin rests on wooden rails attached to burros. Mexican laborers stand, their heads level to the palanquin’s floor. This crafts an inferior image of Mexico by its composition of an American government official seated above Mexicans laborers. The Grateful Guava Merchant (Figure 2) similarly portrays a kneeling Mexican merchant kissing the author’s hand. Dress and skin color depicts racial and economic differences between the commonly dressed dark skinned Mexican and well dressed pale skinned American.

This reading of Hon. William H. Seward Traveling in Mexico (Figure 1) is supported by analysis of the text describing the palanquin. The text closely describes what the viewer sees. Four stalwart Mexican laborers carry Mr. Seward who sits in a cushioned armchair under a canopy. The laborers travel over mountainous terrain nearly as fast as a man on horseback while four mules carry the palanquin over smooth parts of the road. Laborers wear cotton pantaloons, palm leaf hats, and sandals, Mr. Seward wears a Western suit [3]. Other period illustrations similarly represented Mexico in this way, for example, Litera (Figure 3) in Brantz Mayer’s *Mexico as It Was and as It Is, With Numerous Illustrations on Wood* [12]. This scene shows an Anglo traveler’s palanquin carried on two burros led by two Mexican laborers.

Textual analysis strongly supports the reading of the “Grateful Guava Merchant” (Figure 2). It describes this Mexican merchant who makes a living selling guava, described by the author as a “nasty, little fruit” [3] that makes men sick. In this reading, the author buys the merchant’s guava stand for 25 cents. In response, the merchant calls him the “grande hombre of the Estados Unidos del Norte,” falls to the ground, and kisses the author’s hand. Evans intended to destroy his roadside shop, but refrained because the merchant showed devotion to him. Furthermore, the author states his benevolent action made the merchant a friend of American forever. American writers did not simply describe Mexicans, but expressed superiority and gave moral judgments [6].

3. Conclusion

My research reveals another group of illustrations in *Our Sister Republic* showed Mexicans as exotic Others in need of American influence. Figure study images characterize Mexicans as Others by illustrating clothing, cultural practices, and skin and hair embellishments [9] as starkly different from American cultural practices. These figure studies depict frontal and side images of Mexicans, emphasizing their dress and vocation in particularly stark contrast to contemporary U.S. cultural practices. An example of this type of image is Bride and Groom Entering the Church (Figure 4). It features a man and woman dressed in traditional Mexican clothing and wearing large flower headdresses for the ceremony. Indian Embroiderers and Their Work (Figure 5) shows two women dressed the same in embroidered blouses and sashes wearing long skirts and holding hats. One poses in a frontal view and
the other poses in a side view. This crafts the exotic Other image of Mexico by its quasi-scientific treatment of Mexicans as cultural specimens rather than individuals. Numerous images appear throughout Our Sister Republic of tortilla makers, statuary makers, mine workers, earthenware sellers, water carrier, orange seller, poultry seller and vegetable seller.

Reading images as cultural specimens is supported by text that describes the bride and bridegroom as pure blood Mexicans wearing unique headdresses [3]. Similarly, the text describes embroidery as an Indian specialty well made by illiterate people and further explains that their lace is bought in Mexico for $5 to $10, but in the U.S. is bought for $50-$100. Other period illustrations similarly represent Mexicans in a quasi-scientific way, for example, Making Tortillas, (Figure 7) because it shows two women making tortillas, one from a side view and the other from a frontal view. Likewise, Fruit Seller (Figure 6) portrays a frontal pose of a woman selling fruit [13].

Data gathered from closely examining the images and through studies of scholarly work of the image of nineteenth-century Mexico, reveals a relationship of U.S. hegemony over Mexico, by portraying Mexicans as laborers, incompetent, exotic and different than Americans. Manthorne suggests as the American people became aware of Latin America’s political and economic potential, they sought images of this exotic land [14]. Such images illustrate the American politics of subjugation as described by Hart. In post-Civil War America, Mexicans were seen as barbarians, semi-savage and unable to rule themselves. The U.S. used the ideas along with theories of racial inferiority to validate the ambitions of business and transportation particularly railroads [10]. Evans’s images portraying American man above the Mexican man pointedly shows Mexicans as physically and morally inferior, the Mexican as servant and the American as master. In ethnographic subject matter, nineteenth-century expeditionary art characterized foreigners by costume and dress. The cultural differences in clothing and ornamentation and in curious cultural practices were pointed out to American readers to provide information on the differences in appearance between Mexico and the U.S. In particular, ethnographic differences were explained as brown-skinned or swarthy also depicted in these images [6, 9].

This paper has proven images and text in Our Sister Republic misrepresented Mexico to justify American imperialism in the late nineteenth century. The U.S. used the policies of the Monroe Doctrine and Manifest Destiny not only to expand U.S. borders, but to expand U.S. influence and protection into Mexico. Nineteenth-century Anglo authors penned accounts
influenced by ethnocentrism and prejudice that helped shape the American public’s views of Mexicans as lazy, incompetent, and different. *Our Sister Republic* reinforces the popular American sentiment of Mexico as unequal to the U.S. as depicted in the genre of travel narratives. Evans’s images painted a picture of American intellectual and racial superiority while displaying Mexican merchants and cultural practices under a quasi-scientific microscope of visual dissection.

### Author Biography

Tiffany Tuley is a University of North Texas graduate student in Art History with a specialization in modern architecture and art. In her former career as a Historic Preservation Planner and Project Manager she developed a keen interest in the development of cities, and the relationship between modern art and architecture. Previous presentations include North Texas Scholars Day invited lecture, North Texas Art Gallery talk, City of Tampa Historic Preservation Commission meeting invited lecture, Ybor City Historic District tour and Barrio Latino Commission workshop invited lecture, Environmental Management Conference invited lecture, Texas Historical Commission Local Government Workshop invited lecture, Professional Women’s Club Dallas Chapter Keynote speaker, and numerous public neighborhood meetings. Currently, she is completing a curatorial internship at the Nasher Sculpture Center and compiling research for her thesis project. Future plans include completing her MA in Art History and applying to Ph.D. programs to continue her research. She holds a BA in Political Science from the University of the South and a MHP from the University of Georgia.

### References


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