

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Politics of Printing and Knowledge Production in Latin America and the Caribbean

Daniela Samur 

Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, United States
Email: ds2294@cornell.edu

Rodrigo Camargo de Godoi, *Francisco de Paula Brito: A Black Publisher in Imperial Brazil*, trans. H. Sabrina Gledhill (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2020), 398 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8265-0016-8 (paper), \$39.95; ISBN: 978-0-8265-0017-5 (cloth), \$99.95.

Jorell A. Meléndez-Badillo, *The Lettered Barriada: Workers, Archival Power, and the Politics of Knowledge in Puerto Rico* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021), 280 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1478-2 (paper), \$26.95; ISBN: 978-1-4780-1385-3 (cloth), \$99.95.

Corinna Zeltsman, *Ink under the Fingernails: Printing Politics in Nineteenth-Century Mexico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 350 pp. ISBN: 978-0-5203-4434-1 (paper), \$34.95; ISBN: 978-0-5203-4433-4 (cloth), \$85.00.

Abstract

In this review essay I examine how recent books about print culture and knowledge production in Latin America and the Caribbean have addressed the relationship between printing and power, and in doing so have contributed to global discussions about the hierarchies of knowledge production. The study of print culture in a broader social framework shows how printed materials matter beyond the realm of culture. I explore how these new works have understood printing as political and have unravelled its contentious politics; how they have grappled with the global circulation and mobility of printers, prints, and paper; and how they have examined the relation between printing, reading, and writing and the production of urban space.

Keywords: print culture; knowledge production; lettered city; state formation; Latin America

The relationship between language and power is at the core of historical disciplines, and an inescapable question in studies about print culture and knowledge production. This relationship is increasingly important in scholarship about Latin America and the Caribbean (and other regions in the so-called Global South), areas that often appear as appendages in stories about scientific revolutions or world literary republics. Decrying the Eurocentrism of scholarship about how knowledge is produced and consumed has become a platitude and does little to unravel diffusionist and triumphalist narratives. Instead of simplistic denouncements, recent scholarship on print culture in the

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Research Institute for History, Leiden University. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

Americas has rather tried to examine the rich and contested relationship between prints and power on its own terms.¹ How is it that printing is related to politics? Is it because publications are always political in nature? Or because people in the Americas have used newspapers, books, and ephemera as tools in their struggles for citizenship and freedom? Is this one of the powers of prints? How is it different from the power of imperial and state-led printing endeavours? And how are these local, regional, and national contestations intertwined with the transatlantic book market, or with the global circulation of workers or ideas? How are the politics of print in Latin America and the Caribbean both deeply local and global in nature?

Zeltsman's *Ink under the Fingernails*, Meléndez-Badillo's *The Lettered Barriada*, and Rodrigo Camargo de Godoi's *Francisco de Paula Brito* not only address some of these questions, but are an example of why studying print culture in a broad social framework matters for understanding the intertwinement of language, politics, and power in the Americas. The period covered by these books, starting in the late eighteenth century and ending in the 1930s, is a key one for imperial and state formation, and for the definition of what liberalism and citizenship meant in the region. This period has often been wrongly characterised as one in which connections and exchanges receded as the Atlantic world allegedly lost its coherence after the Age of Revolutions.² These books, however, show that paper and printers continued to move back and forth across the continent and the Atlantic Ocean, and that people forged bonds of solidarity and "global sensibilities" by means of print culture that were crucial for the construction of political identities (Meléndez-Badillo). In this review essay I examine how *Ink under the Fingernails*, *The Lettered Barriada*, and *Francisco de Paula Brito* understand print culture as political and unravel the politics of printing. In doing so, I stress how Zeltsman, Meléndez-Badillo, and Godoi advance the field of print culture in the Americas by showing how publications matter beyond the realm of culture. In doing so, their books contribute to global discussions about the hierarchies of knowledge production in colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial contexts, as well as to the role of prints in shaping state and imperial formation and urban political culture.

Zeltsman's *Ink under the Fingernails* studies the politics of print production and regulation in Mexico City from the late colonial era to the Mexican Revolution of 1910. In seven chapters that move chronologically, the book examines how the politics of printing unfolded on the ground by looking at the shifting relationships and negotiations between printers, authors, state bureaucrats, and religious authorities. The first chapters focus on the "politics of loyalty" that shaped the Bourbon period under Spanish colonial rule and how loyalty wavered during Mexico's independence in the 1810s and 1820s. The following chapters trace "the birth of the printer as a modern figure" during the early republican era (18). Zeltsman analyses the state's publishing efforts, the working world at the official printing shop, and the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to criminalise the press. By following the trajectories of a few prominent printers, like Manuel Antonio Valdez, Ignacio Cumplido, and Filomeno Mata, and examining various case studies, Zeltsman argues that discussions around press freedom defined the meanings of

¹ For broad reflections see the special issue of *Itinerario*, "Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print," 44:2 (2020), ed. Emma Hunter and Leslie James; and *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Derek R. Peterson, Emma Hunter, and Stephanie Newell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016). For colonial Latin America see *Beyond the Lettered City: Indigenous Literacy in the Andes*, ed. Joanne Rappaport and Tom Cummins (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012); and *Indigenous Intellectuals: Knowledge, Power, and Colonial Culture in Mexico and the Andes*, ed. Gabriela Ramos and Yanna Yannakakis (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

² For the argument about a "larger history" of the Atlantic world during the nineteenth century, see Donna Gabaccia, "A Long Atlantic in a Wider World," *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents* 1:1 (2004), 1–15.

liberalism in nineteenth-century Mexico, and that regulating prints shaped both the process of state formation and urban political culture.

Francisco de Paula Brito: A Black Publisher in Imperial Brazil, originally published in Portuguese in 2016 as *Um editor do império*, is a study of the life of Francisco de Paula Brito, a black merchant, bookseller, printer, and publisher who worked in Rio de Janeiro from the 1830s to the 1860s. Before 1808, Rio de Janeiro (or any other city in today's Brazil) was not a centre of print production, unlike Mexico City. But circumstances changed with the transfer of Portugal's royal court to Rio de Janeiro after Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian Peninsula and the political crisis that ensued. The establishment of the Royal Press, the Royal Library, and the formation of the Empire of Brazil in 1822 shaped the conditions that allowed Brito, who belonged to a family of freedpersons, to learn the printing business and become a well-known printer and publisher in the empire's capital. The book proceeds chronologically, starting with Brito's family background and his social ascension in the 1840s, explaining how he transformed and expanded his business during the 1850s and continued to print until his death (despite going bankrupt), thanks to the patronage connections that shaped printing in nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro. Unlike Zeltsman, Godoi's primary questions are not about liberalism or the contentious character of politics in the nineteenth century, but more generally about the overarching social, political, and economic circumstances in which printers emerged in Brazil.

The Lettered Barriada studies how a group of enlightened workingmen (*obreros ilustrados*) "crafted a makeshift intellectual community" by means of print culture, political participation, and labour rituals (2). Meléndez-Badillo examines this community forged by enlightened workingmen, called the lettered *barriada*, from the 1890s to the 1930s as Puerto Rico fought for its independence from the Spanish Empire and was occupied by the United States. Meléndez-Badillo traces the trajectories of men like Santiago Iglesias Pantín and José Ferrer y Ferrer to explain how they ended up controlling Puerto Rican working-class intellectual production. The first chapters examine how this cluster of workingmen created material and nonmaterial archives through print culture despite being at the margins of the country's cultural elite. To understand the lettered *barriada*'s development, Meléndez-Badillo examines how the establishment of the Socialist Party was a watershed for consolidating the intellectual community, how the student strike of 1933 debilitated labour organisation at a moment when *obreros ilustrados* became legitimate politicians, and how three books ended up defining working-class historical production. The processes of knowledge production, Meléndez-Badillo argues, were characterised by mechanisms of silencing, and to better understand how they operated, he examines the "ideational archives" and "counterarchives" that have remained at the margins of Puerto Rico's labour history.

The three books, although focusing on dissimilar aspects of print culture and knowledge production, have a shared emphasis on the relation between language, printing, and politics, a key question in the scholarship of the Americas, and on what Corinna Zeltsman has called "printing politics." Zeltsman uses the term to define the "contentious field of political exchange that flourished" around printed texts in Mexico City during the long nineteenth century (4). The tensions and debates surrounding the production and regulation of prints, she and Godoi both contend, cannot be properly understood without examining how press laws came into being and how printing helped in shaping broader discussions about citizenship and individual freedom, two basic tenants of nineteenth-century liberalism in the Americas. Not only do Zeltsman and Godoi examine press freedom as an "abstract element" of political systems that mirrored how freedom or rights were being defined, but as a "set of practices" (Zeltsman, 60). Godoi shows, for instance, that although licences and thus prior censorship were abolished in the 1820s with the

creation of the Brazilian Empire, other mechanisms of control came into place. Printers were obliged to submit proofs for examination or include imprint statements with the name and place of the printing shop. Both in Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro, printers were active figures in shaping legal interpretations at a moment in which law was fundamental to forge and legitimise the changing political arrangements, to prevent the confiscation of assets, fines, or imprisonment. Brito, for instance, in trying to appear less partisan, changed the name of his printing business to *Tipografía Imparcial*—literally “Impartial Typography” even as he was strengthening his links to the Conservatives in the mid-1830s. Freedom of the press, Zeltsman and Godoi demonstrate, is crucial not because it carved the path for the expansion of the world of publishing, as the conventional argument goes, but because it shaped anxieties regarding loyalty, legitimacy, disorder, and access to the public sphere. As the rise of print culture in Mexico (and perhaps Latin America more widely) was not market-driven and not inherently democratic (as Jürgen Habermas’s now classic study suggested) but depended on the growth of the state and patronage connections, the term “print clientelism” rather than Benedict Anderson’s “print capitalism,” Zeltsman argues, better explains the burgeoning world of printing and its intertwinement with politics and the state (11).³

Both *Ink under the Fingernails* and *Francisco de Paula Brito* stress how the legal notions of responsibility and anonymity either shaped or reinforced the distinctions between authors, printers, and editors, a fundamental question in the fields of book history and print culture. In doing so, the books illuminate how these roles were defined during the nineteenth century, which is fundamental for resisting simplistic and linear explanations about specialisation that are still common in studies about printing.⁴ As Godoi and Zeltsman show, boundaries between professions continued to be porous, and most people often identified (sometimes pragmatically) with more than one label. Brito was a printer, bookseller, and publisher who pioneered the publication of “Brazilian novels” (86–99). And a poet, too, who used his verses both to advertise the goods sold in his shop and to profess his admiration to the emperor. Meléndez-Badillo’s book also showcases the myriad roles and identities *obreros ilustrados* forged in Puerto Rico in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Simultaneously acting as newspaper editors, authors of books, leaders of labour unions, and politicians, *obreros ilustrados* used printing to engage in labour struggles and define their political positions. Godoi, Zeltsman, and Meléndez-Badillo convey how reading, writing, and printing were fundamental for the ways various peoples used the lettered world to participate in public life, adding to the well-developed topic of the public sphere in the Americas and connecting printing with liberalism, republicanism, and citizenship, three of the most important themes in Latin American historiography in recent years. Yet they also go beyond the study of the public sphere as a conceptual or normative space—a common and limiting approach in previous studies—by looking into the daily political contestations regarding print production and the regulatory role of the state. Additionally, Godoi, Zeltsman, and Meléndez-Badillo underscore the need to examine the creation of readers, writers, and publics in the plural—that is, with attention to their uneven temporalities, spatialities, and positions within power structures—as other scholars working on the so-called Global South have done in the past.⁵

³ Habermas’s book was originally published in German in 1962 and first translated to English in 1989 as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. For an overview of the public sphere in Latin America, see Pablo Piccato, “Public Sphere in Latin America: A Map of the Historiography,” *Social History* 35:2 (May 2010), 165–92.

⁴ Godoi speaks of a “gradual specialization,” *Francisco de Paula Brito*, 4, 86–7.

⁵ See Hunter and James, Introduction, “Colonial Public Spheres and the Worlds of Print”; and Stephanie Newell, “Afterword: Newsprint Worlds and Reading Publics in Colonial Contexts,” *Itinerario* 44:2 (2020), 227–42 and 435–45.

Printing is also related to politics, Zeltsman stresses in her book, because publications were the daily material of statecraft. Brito in Brazil and the various printers examined by Zeltsman in Mexico City, for instance, were part and parcel of projects to build government printing shops. These official establishments were key for the process of state formation not just because they guaranteed a tighter control over printing or served as testimony to the state's efficiency, but because they made daily political practice possible. The official gazette and bureaucratic forms like letterheads, lottery tickets, or passports printed in these establishments were vital for the state's rituals and claims about its legitimacy.⁶ While *Ink under the Fingernails* and *Francisco de Paula Brito* focus on both the rhetorical and material role of printing in partisan disputes and state formation, Meléndez-Badillo's analysis of power struggles leans towards the politics of knowledge production. In the studies of Brazil and Mexico who produced knowledge mattered for the sake of political responsibility and judicial prosecution, while in Puerto Rico its importance revolved around the control over historical narratives.

Puerto Rico's *obreros ilustrados*, Meléndez-Badillo contends, did not seek to challenge how knowledge was produced but rather to gain access to it. And they used workshops, labour unions, and political parties to "establish proximity" to the labouring masses and claim their legitimate status as their spokesmen (18). Drawing from Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*, Meléndez-Badillo focuses on the processes through which certain workingmen and workingwomen were continuously and actively silenced by the few who became historical narrators.⁷ Meléndez-Badillo's study of the "counterarchives" created by three women—anarchist Luisa Capetillo, black laundress Paca Escabí, and illiterate black labour organiser Juana Colón—are specially illuminating. By showing how their trajectories were suppressed by the lettered *barriada* (that is, the community of enlightened workingmen), Meléndez-Badillo underscores how silencing was entwined with the construction of masculinities and the "de-Africanization" of blackness. Both *The Lettered Barriada* and *Francisco de Paula Brito* remind us of a long overdue question in studies of print culture in Latin America and the Caribbean: the role of race and the place of brown and black peoples in the world of printing. Brito, Godoi explains, sought to overcome racial biases by positing himself, a black man, as a patriotic citizen, while simultaneously depending on enslaved people for the labour at his household and printing businesses.

By showing how the production of Puerto Rico's labour history depended on internal hierarchies and exclusions, *The Lettered Barriada* contributes to recent discussions about archives and power as well. The "archival power" *obreros ilustrados* wielded, Meléndez-Badillo explains, has subsequently defined labour historiography in Puerto Rico, conflating the history of the working class with that of its male leaders, and disregarding the stories of women and "the scabs, the nonunionized, and the self-educated peasants" (27, 188). The discussion in the book is important and perhaps more importantly controversial for its assumptions about what archives are. Meléndez-Badillo argues that archives should not be considered solely as physical repositories but as any collection of evidence. The set of "desires, ideas, political projects, [. . .] feelings, anxieties" of working people, he contends, should be seen as "ideational archives" since they are "assemblages of knowledges" crucial for understanding "the struggles for remembrance" (52, 85, 148, 157).⁸ Yet,

⁶ See Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994).

⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). See especially 26–30 for the different phases of historical silencing in the making of sources, archives, narratives, and history.

⁸ Meléndez-Badillo follows the arguments of Antoinette Burton (mainly), Anjali Arondekar, and Ann Cvetkovich.

if all these emotions and practices can be archives, one might ask what then is not an archive? *The Lettered Barriada* doesn't clarify what distinguishes an archive from an "assemblage" of memories, or how their powers differ. Further methodological and theoretical discussions might answer these (and other) questions that readers can pose, as Meléndez-Badillo's premises and explanations are not always discernible. How does uneven access to buildings, shelves, archivists, or catalogues determine how historians access physical, official repositories versus collections at union venues, makeshift libraries, or people's homes? A few words on these matters would have explained, for example, how the edited collections produced by *obreros ilustrados* were "mobile archives" and whose hands moved them (157). A more careful engagement with a growing scholarship on archives—scantly cited in the book—like that of Ann Laura Stoler, Kathryn Burns, Saidiya Hartman, Marisa Fuentes, Jean Allman, or Achille Mbembe (to name just a few), would have allowed Meléndez-Badillo to better address some of these questions.⁹

The broader question about the role of archives in writing histories of print culture is central to the field. For too long scarce records have been an excuse for not pursuing social histories of the print world in Latin America and the Caribbean. Without Brito's personal correspondence or business account books (the two most obvious sources, which abound for other places, like France, England, or Spain), Godoi resorts to baptisms and marriage records, almanacs, directories, and judicial cases, as well as to what Natalie Zemon Davis has called "collateral evidence" to understand Brito's world.¹⁰ Although sometimes Godoi's own voice gets lost amidst superfluous archival details and lengthy quotations, his efforts in elucidating Brito's family's origins and his career as a printer need to be praised. Godoi's creativity certainly pays off in his expansive and exhaustive depiction of Rio de Janeiro's print world. Zeltsman's archival work is even more impressive. In addition to examining government and church communications, state contracts, records from the government printing shop, and notarial documents in Mexico's national and municipal archives, Zeltsman used periodicals and papers from a bookselling family housed at libraries in the United States. Her judicious and meticulous analysis of certain sources, like the 1877 type-specimen booklet discussed in chapter 6, are proof of her attention to both the material and rhetorical dimensions of print culture. Godoi and Zeltsman's efforts in going beyond print sources like newspapers, books, and catalogues is ultimately what allows them to demonstrate the importance of printing beyond the realm of culture.

If the power struggles examined in *The Lettered Barriada* are those related to the creation and contestation of historical narratives, in *Ink under the Fingernails* they are linked to everyday printing practices. Both, however, highlight a crucial tension in knowledge production: that between manual and intellectual labour. To surpass this simplistic

⁹ The historiography is huge, but some foundational works are Kathryn Burns, *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12:2 (June 2008), 1–14; Jean Allman, "Phantoms of the Archive: Kwame Nkrumah, a Nazi Pilot Named Hanna, and the Contingencies of Postcolonial History-Writing," *AHR Forum, American Historical Review* 118:1 (February 2013), 105–29; Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht, Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 19–27. Most of these are not carefully discussed or cited in *The Lettered Barriada*. Those that are include Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Antoinette Burton's *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and the edited volume *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Jessica Roitman and Karwan Fatah-Black, "'Being Speculative Is Better than to Not Do It at All': An Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis," *Itinerario* 39:1 (2015), 6.

dyad, Zeltsman's book shows, it is necessary to examine daily labouring practices. Compositors in Mexico City were first and foremost valued for their dexterity to set up type, but like *obreros ilustrados* in Puerto Rico, compositors also had opportunities to showcase their erudition and experiment with "their literary sensibilities" (Meléndez-Badillo, 2). In addition, despite the internal hierarchies, printing shops in Mexico City, Zeltsman argues, "fostered a more democratic worldview" where educated editors, skilled press operators, and illiterate servants worked jointly to produce publications (6). In Puerto Rico, too, printing shops were "spaces where people from different cultural backgrounds came together," and notwithstanding the control wielded by the owners or editors, self-education and camaraderie were defining characteristics of these places (35).

Yet, *The Lettered Barriada* fails to demonstrate how uneven access to the means to produce knowledge operated on the ground. Who owned the printing shop and the presses from whence newspapers came and whose editorial boards exuded their paternalism towards the labouring masses? A more detailed account on how apprenticeships worked, for example, could have explained the hierarchies within printing shops. Or an examination of access to credit could shed light on why and how certain workers could purchase paper and presses while others were denied access to the means to write their own stories. The source base from which Meléndez-Badillo draws—primarily newspapers and books, as well as official documents from labour unions and some archival sources in Puerto Rico and the United States—certainly does not allow for answering these questions. As he contends, the scarcity of sources hinders certain inquiries. However, as Godoi's book shows, collateral evidence offers certain glimpses. What is surprising is that Meléndez-Badillo sets out to "map the lettered *barriada*'s materiality" and claims to be "attentive to the materiality of working-class archives" (3). How Meléndez-Badillo understands materiality, however, does not come altogether clear in the book. He states that ideational archives are "nonmaterial," but then what do we make of Juana Colón's pamphlet, created by the people of Comerío, that "kept alive" her story? (3). How is it that printed texts are nonmaterial?

When Meléndez-Badillo speaks of the materiality of archives he is referring mostly to how sources were produced, gathered, and used to write histories about the labour movement in Puerto Rico; that is, how the books and newspapers ended up heralded as official stories while the memories of black women organisers were silenced. Such a perspective is the result of Meléndez-Badillo's emphasis on identity, and hence the sidestepping of the study of the working peoples' access to the means of production: the presses where books and newspapers were made and upon which the lettered *barriada* depended. The notion of materiality in studies about print culture and knowledge production can be much more encompassing and complex, as Emma Hunter and Leslie James have convincingly argued.¹¹ How documents are gathered, organised, and accessed, as well as various other aspects of the materiality of print culture can be analysed, ranging from the study of marginalia to the contest between labour and capital at the printing shop. Centring production and labouring practices, studying the chain from production to consumption, and considering the global networks of exchange by which prints circulate, Zeltsman and Godoi's book convey (albeit with different depths), are some fruitful paths for doing so.

By examining how printed texts circulated in urban space these books illuminate another pending endeavour of scholarship on print culture: its relation to spatial practices and more broadly the relation between knowledge, power, and geography. Although Ángel Rama's notion of the "lettered city" remains the central reference for examining the relations between politics, power, and knowledge in Latin America and the Caribbean, the

¹¹ Hunter and James, Introduction, "Colonial Public Spheres," 230–1.

spatial dimension of this relationship remains to be addressed more thoroughly. Rama's concept of the lettered city referred not to the place, but to the people who "handled the pen." But, as he argued in the early 1980s, the hierarchies of the social order, including those of the lettered world, manifested in the spaces of the city.¹² The writers, printers, and intellectuals studied in these three books were all spatially situated, and the practices of writing, printing, and reading unfolded in concrete spaces. A more attuned examination of print and book spaces not only aids in bridging the gap between the lettered city and what Rama called the "real city," but can explain how forms of exclusion operated. Although none of the three books explicitly use space and place as analytical categories, and a more comprehensive analysis of the relation between printing, knowledge production, and space, like that proposed by Miles Ogborn, is still pending for Latin America and the Caribbean, Zeltsman, Meléndez-Badillo, and Godoi's attention to cities and the careful study of spaces where prints were produced or discussed do offer glimpses into how studies of print culture can benefit from spatial approaches.¹³

Zeltsman, for instance, conveys how the location of book and print spaces within the city signalled their closeness vis-à-vis the state institutions. It was not a coincidence that the National Palace in Mexico City housed the various utterances of the official printing shop. Godoi highlights too how locations curtailed or enabled certain social practices with his detailed analysis of the area around Praça da Constituição in Rio de Janeiro, where Brito's bookstore and printing shop was located (a detailed map, however, would have been a boon). As Godoi explains, Brito's shop was nearby the São Pedro Theatre, increasing the "foot traffic in the shop" on show days. Unsurprisingly, Brito printed plays and opera librettos, seeking to attract theatre visitors (199). Spatial organisation within printing shops, Zeltsman demonstrates in her study of the shop floor in chapter 6, "also marked lines of division" based on work rhythms, skill, and pay scales (177). Similarly, Meléndez-Badillo contends that print spaces had not only physical dimensions, but social ones. At *cafetines* (small cafés), social study centres, and *mítines* (public meetings) in San Juan and other cities of Puerto Rico, people gathered to read newspapers, study foreign books, sit with comrades to debate and organise, and to practice oratory skills. The spaces of the print world, *The Lettered Barriada* suggest, should not be limited to bookstores, printing shops, and libraries. Instead, other spaces where people read and write or participate in conversations spurred by the print world are also worth studying, as scholars who have examined coffee shops, taverns, or barber shops have shown before.¹⁴ A more thorough examination, in future scholarship, of the relation between social practices and spaces of print culture can better explain how prints forged urban worlds and how they created geographical connections as well.

The lettered *barriada* was not contained by the cities and towns of Puerto Rico, Meléndez-Badillo explains, as some *obreros ilustrados* positioned themselves as participants in an imagined global labour community even when they remained in Puerto Rico. *The Lettered Barriada* shows how *obreros ilustrados* referred to print media and public events to commemorate the *Semana trágica* in Barcelona in 1909, actively shaping a "Spanish-speaking world of labor" (55). Other workingmen and workingwomen crossed borders back and forth to participate in labour conventions in the United States or help in union organising in the Dominican Republic or Cuba. In doing so, they all helped

¹² Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Montevideo: Arca, 1998), 32. The original in Spanish is "que manejaban la pluma."

¹³ Miles Ogborn, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the English East India Company* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

¹⁴ For a recent study in the region see Cristina Soriano, *Tides of Revolution: Information, Insurgencies, and the Crisis of Colonial Rule in Venezuela* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

to forge various intellectual communities.¹⁵ Yet these exchanges and circulations were profoundly uneven and hierarchical, and although they enabled collaborations, they also allowed for the erection of other barriers. The exchanges between the Puerto Rican labour movement and the American Federation of Labor, Meléndez-Badillo shows, were instrumental in defining an ideal worker as male and raceless, further silencing many of the working people who did not fit into those taxonomies.

Other forms of movement and exchange were important for shaping the print world in Mexico and Brazil. Printing was feasible, to an important extent, thanks to the commercial networks of exchange that allowed for the importation of paper, type, and presses from the United States or France. The publication of certain texts, similarly, depended on the movement of lithographs and translations, and on the personal trajectory of printers. This was the case with the publication of *The Mysteries of the Inquisition*, the “global best seller” examined by Zeltsman in chapter 4 (18). In addition to the personal travels of printers that gave them access to knowledge and materials, like the metal plates for the illustrations of that polemical text, the trajectories of the material texts themselves were transnational, convoluted, and highly contested.

Zeltsman, Meléndez-Badillo, and Godoi’s efforts to demonstrate the vitality of circulations forged by printed material are especially relevant as the fields of print culture and book history in Latin America have been latecomers to transnational and global approaches. These analytical lenses have been more common in studies of the early modern period focusing on networks of communication in the Caribbean and their role in revolutionary politics, for example, or the transatlantic book trade.¹⁶ Broader scales of analysis and attempts to build frameworks for comparative or continental histories are not only useful to transcend the national framework that still characterises the field of print culture, but to unravel unidirectional overviews in which the so-called Global South appears as a passive place. Bridging the gap between Brazil and Latin America and overcoming what Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo has called their “mutual ignorance” is of paramount importance too. Languages, the different path towards republicanism, or a supposed Brazilian exceptionalism together have often been cited to explain the mutual elisions.¹⁷ Yet reading these three books in tandem shows, for instance, that selling books and periodicals in Rio de Janeiro came with the same challenges as elsewhere in Latin America: limited capital, the high cost of importing supplies, and low literacy rates.¹⁸ Yet these processes cannot be fully understood if we do not account for the costs of transatlantic shipping or the efforts of French or Spanish publishers to dominate the American book market, inquiries that necessarily require comparisons, broad scopes and scales, or multi-sited archival research.

Ink under the Fingernails, Francisco de Paula Brito, and *The Lettered Barriada*, however, err on the side of modesty in stating the stakes of their questions and the broader

¹⁵ Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983, rev. ed. 2016) remains a key text. See also his *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005) for understanding the transnational network of Marxism, socialism, and anarchism, surprisingly not referenced by Meléndez-Badillo.

¹⁶ See for instance, Ada Ferrer, *Freedom’s Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Cristina Gómez Álvarez, *Navegar con libros. El comercio de libros entre España y Nueva España: una visión cultural de la Independencia (1750–1820)* (Madrid: Trama, 2011); Eugenia Roldán Vera, *The British Book Trade and Spanish American Independence: Education and Knowledge Transmission in Transcontinental Perspective* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003).

¹⁷ Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 63. See chap. 3, “The Question of Brazil: An Inevitable Note on Brazil’s Historical ‘Yes, but Thanks’ to the Idea of Being Latin American,” 62–75.

¹⁸ An important contribution in this endeavour is *Press, Power, and Culture in Imperial Brazil*, ed. Hendrik Kraay, Celso Thomas Castilho, and Teresa Cribelli (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2021).

contributions to the fields of material and print culture. Godoi himself refrains from commenting beyond the Brazilian case. A more thorough engagement with historiographical or theoretical interventions coming from Latin America or other places in the so-called Global South, instead of the reliance on French historiography, for instance, could have opened more enriching dialogues.¹⁹ While Zeltsman's claims are poignant and acute, they remain restricted to the Mexican case, even when wider interventions for the American context were called for. More farsighted, Meléndez-Badillo highlights how certain processes unfolding in Puerto Rico, like the links between the trade union movement with mutual aid groups and artisanal societies, occurred concomitantly elsewhere in the Americas. Such parallels, even if brief, are important steps to bridge gaps between national histories. Nonetheless, the books by Corinna Zeltsman, Rodrigo Camargo de Godoi, and Jorell A. Meléndez-Badillo are key contributions to the field of print culture and more importantly, to its connection with Latin American and Caribbean urban political culture, labour struggles, and state formation. The books show as well various methodological avenues for writing histories about print culture. Biographical approaches, the study of an intellectual community, or the analysis of debates around the production and regulation of printed texts here prove fruitful for unravelling the multiple ways printing was intertwined with politics in Latin American and the Caribbean.

Acknowledgements. Many thanks to Raymond B. Craib and Josh Savala for their thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of this essay. My gratitude to the editorial team at *Itinerario* for their work.

Daniela Samur is a doctoral candidate in History at Cornell University. She holds two B.A.s, in Political Science and in History, from Universidad de los Andes, and an M.A in Literature from Universidad Nacional (Bogotá, Colombia). Her dissertation is a social and spatial history of Bogotá's world of books from the 1880s to the 1930s.

¹⁹ A similar critique is voiced by Corinna Zeltsman in her review of Godoi's book at H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews, June 2021, <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56359>.

Cite this article: Samur D (2023). The Politics of Printing and Knowledge Production in Latin America and the Caribbean. *Itinerario* 47, 278–287. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115323000037>