Reseña de libro

*Relaciones. Esudios de Historia y Sociedad*

Mary Kay Vaughan (2015), *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City’s Rebel Generation*, Durham, Duke University Press, 289 pp., ISBN 978-0-8223-5781-0.

Mary Kay Vaughan’s latest work, *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City’s Rebel Generation*, uses the life of Oaxacan-born Mexico City painter José “Pepe” Zúñiga as a lens into the formation of his generation, one that intersected with and benefitted from, but was not in lock-step with, the 1968 student movement. This book builds upon the major historical contributions to our understanding of twentieth-century Mexico made by Vaughan’s previous work on the history of education, patriarchy and the nation-state, and gender, but it adopts an entirely different methodology and tone. Drawing from interviews and supplemented by archival sources, Vaughan traces Zúñiga’s life from a custom-bound, traditionally-oriented childhood in Oaxaca in the late 1930s to the pulsing beat of an adolescence and young adulthood in cosmopolitan Mexico City through the early 1970s. This personal trajectory becomes a metaphor for the evolution of his generation, exposed as they were to an unprecedented rash of sights, sounds, global influences, technologies, emotions and sensibilities.

Vaughan writes in the genre that she terms “new biography,” defined as a practice to determine “how an individual life reflects and illuminates historical processes” (3). While one life story cannot be made emblematic of a generation, Vaughan finds that some features of Zúñiga’s life were shared by his peers: the increase in child welfare provisions, the surge in mass media entertainment, “the domestication of violent masculinity,” and the emergence of a critical youth subculture (8-10). Through an exploration of the cultural influences that marked Zúñiga’s childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, Vaughan characterizes a generation that came of age in spite of, rather than because of, the official historical narrative that defines the time.

The book structure follows a chronological format, beginning in Oaxaca in the 1930s with the troubled circumstances of Zúñiga’s parents’ union. When Pepe and his family move to Mexico City in 1943, the chapters tumble forward in a rich swirl of descriptions of the diverse sensory and entertainment experiences that form the cultural milieu in the city at the time. With an epicenter at the family home in Colonia Guerrero, the first half of the book follows young Pepe and his siblings, cousins, and friends as they scamper through the courtyards and across the rooftops of the downtown working-class *vecindades* to witness the cosmopolitan excitement on offer. Vaughan supplements the sometimes-contradictory accounts recalled by Zúñiga and his intimates with radio transcripts, textbooks, primers, film summaries, and song lyrics to describe the sights and sounds that shaped their worldviews. The second half of the book focuses on Zúñiga’s training and evolution as an artist. He attended La Esmeralda, an art school opened in 1942 as an alternative to the heavily didactic Academia San Carlos. There he encountered mentors and colleagues in the art community that lasted a lifetime.

Chapter Eight in particular illuminates a moment in which Zúñiga’s personal life intersected with the cultural life of the nation. The 1964 construction of the Museo Nacional de Antropología was a political decision intended to forge a sense of national unity in times of increasing social tension. While scholars and citizens have criticized many aspects of the decision-making and representation that went into this monumental project, Vaughan demonstrates that for the creative collaborators—Zúñiga included—the months of frenzied planning, drafting, thinking, constructing, painting, and assembling represented an “exuberant interlude” in the otherwise unremarkable pace of their lives. The ethnic and generational diversity of those participating in the design of the museum brought together a cross-section of the national population in a creative effort that invigorated their individual sense of purpose and identity.

One of the most remarkable features of the way that Vaughan casts Zúñiga’s life story is in the way that it evolved parallel to, rather than imbricated with, the events playing out on the national stage. Zúñiga emerged as a talented young artist in the mid-twentieth century, yet he did so virtually unaware of the muralists Rivera, Orozco, and Siqueiros, who cast such a long shadow over Mexico’s cultural history. They certainly did not inspire his artistic talent. And while the burgeoning Edad de Oro of Mexican Cinema did draw him to the movie theaters with regularity, he was just as likely to catch a foreign film and commit its dialog to memory. He was swept up by Gene Kelly and Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean, he listened to jazz and the Beatles. The stunning massacre of Mexican youth in the nearby popular neighborhood of Tlatelolco in 1968 impacted Zúñiga’s younger relatives more than it did him; in fact, as Vaughan states, “While he shared many sentiments, principles, and visions that energized the student movement, he lived a different moment as he struggled to create his own work” (184). In 1972, Zúñiga earned a fellowship that took him to France where he remained during some of the most politically galvanized years of the Mexican youth movement. There he honed his artistic style and personal identity.

Vaughan closes the book with a snapshot of Zúñiga’s La Esmeralda cohort’s professional trajectories, while characterizing the changes to the artistic styles and markets in recent years. The closing is somewhat abrupt, leading the reader to return to the introduction as a reminder of the theoretical and organizing principles that guided the book. *Portrait of a Young Painter* is clearly a labor of love, a rich description of a life rendered unforgettable because of the complex national and international cultural influences in which it was forged. Zúñiga’s life story does not map itself easily onto Mexico’s official history, reminding us not to force a causational relationship between the personal and the national. On a related note, the powerful sway of transnational media and entertainment influences on the sentimental evolution of Zúñiga’s generation cannot be overstated. The creation of a generation, seen from the perspective of this Mexico City painter, was really a phenomenon taking place on a global scale for the ascendant urban working class.

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