

Another New World

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Claudio Lomnitz's *Nuestra América* is an account of his Ashkenazi Jewish family's persistent, sometimes bewildered search across four continents for a language, culture, identity, and place they can call their own.

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Reviewed:

Nuestra América: My Family in the Vertigo of Translation

by Claudio Lomnitz

Other Press, 445 pp., \$27.99

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Manuel Adler

Claudio Lomnitz's grandparents Misha Adler and Noemí Milstein, Cali, Colombia, circa 1931

essence, of Claudio Lomnitz's *Nuestra América* is expressed not in its rather anodyne title, which simply means "Our America" in Spanish, but in its enigmatic subtitle: "My Family in the Vertigo of Translation." A reader might wonder what exactly is being translated—another book? a stack of letters?—and how that process could possibly generate such a powerful sensation of confusion and disorientation. But the uncertainty does not last long, for *Nuestra América* quickly develops into an account of one extended family's persistent, sometimes bewildered, even dizzying search, as they ricochet among four continents, for a language, culture, identity, and place they can call their own.

It is, explains Lomnitz—an anthropologist and historian who teaches at Columbia and has written extensively about Mexico, one of his Ashkenazi Jewish family's adopted homelands—very much a "fractured history," spanning four generations and more than a century of turmoil in Europe and Latin America. His relatives, eternal immigrants, learned and forgot one language after another and consistently acted out of an "ardent desire for camouflage" in hopes of fitting in wherever they found themselves, but were frequently threatened or even forced to leave places they hoped could become home, from Germany and Romania to Peru and Colombia.

This is not exactly a new story, but the specific details of his family's quest are unusual, even remarkable. A much more common account, at least in English, is that of the journey from the shtetl to accommodation in the United States or Great Britain. And then there are works like *Out of Egypt* (1994), in which André Aciman wrote, in impressionistic, almost novelistic form and from a distant vantage point, of his Sephardic family's half-century sojourn on the outskirts of the modern Jewish world. Lomnitz has gone in a very different direction, both literally and figuratively: trying to be as rigorously factual as the genre allows, frankly willing to admit that there are details he can never know, he describes a flight from the Jews' historic European heartland to its fringes, to an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic region in which they are an even tinier minority than in Europe or North America.

The Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa calls *Nuestra América* "an autobiography in which we Latin Americans all recognize ourselves." But that does not precisely describe a book whose author does not get around to really delving into the details of his own upbringing until more than three hundred pages have elapsed. In reality, Lomnitz has written a gripping family history in which he is, though clearly the narrator, at most a secondary character. Instead, he has focused most of his attention on his parents and grandparents, particularly his extraordinary maternal grandparents, Misha Adler and Noemí Milstein.

In form and technique, *Nuestra América* resembles Sarah Abrevaya Stein's *Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey Through the Twentieth Century* (2019).¹ Both books draw on a rich mix of family letters and written reminiscences, government archives, official documents in the family's possession, photographs, formal interviews with relatives, personal recollections, newspaper clippings, and scholarly publications, all of which both authors weave together in a seamless way.

In contrast to Stein, though, Lomnitz is a member of the family he is writing about and is recounting a specifically Ashkenazi experience centered in Latin America. Sephardic Jews, expelled from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497, were reconnecting with old and half-remembered linguistic, cultural, and culinary traditions when they settled in places like Venezuela and Chile, and among themselves they spoke not Yiddish but Ladino, derived from medieval Spanish and perfectly comprehensible to any speaker of modern Spanish. The Sephardim had been present for centuries in Latin America, whether clandestinely, as *conversos* or Marranos who pretended in colonial times to be Roman Catholics so as to escape persecution, or openly, after the Spanish Inquisition was formally abolished in 1834.

The Ashkenazi in Latin America have quite a different history and heritage: as an Argentine friend of mine has joked, a true cross-cultural union is any marriage between *rusos*, as the Ashkenazi are often called because of the Russian origins of so many of them, and *turcos*, the nickname given to the Sephardim because the majority had passports of the Ottoman Empire. The Ashkenazi were relative newcomers to the region and ranged from the Jewish gauchos who settled in agricultural outposts sponsored by the Jewish Colonization Association in the late nineteenth century to residents of large cities who gravitated to commerce or the professions beginning around the same time, with others arriving only after the Holocaust. For all of them, nearly everything about life in *di andere Amerike*, Yiddish for “the other America” beyond the United States, was new and alien.

Lomnitz's family emerged from a background that will be familiar to any American Jewish reader. One side had assimilated and found material comfort in Germany, while the other lived in Eastern Europe's Pale of Settlement, in places where borders were constantly shifting and diverse cultures commingled uneasily. Misha Adler grew up in a town where the boundary between the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires ran down the middle of the main street, but after World War I it became part of Romania. Noemí Milstein was born not far away, in a place that is today part of Ukraine but previously belonged to the Soviet Union, Romania, the Russian Empire, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire. Yet the couple might never have met had they not both ended up in Lima, Peru, in the 1920s, where a tiny

Jewish community was forming as the result of a government scheme to attract European immigrants and dilute the indigenous component of the country's identity.

Though some of Lomnitz's ancestors spoke Romanian, like Spanish and Ladino a Romance language, their primary means of communication were Yiddish, Russian, German, Ukrainian, and Hebrew. Lomnitz notes that his mother's parents both spoke eight languages, versus "only" four in his own case, and repeatedly emphasizes what he variously calls "linguistic dispossession," "alingualism," and diglossia—the latter being the habit of switching back and forth between two languages (or forms of the same language) to suit the circumstances. "My mother tongue is a linguistic shipwreck; and it is from there that I write the story of my grandparents," he tells us.

In their decades of wanderings, Lomnitz's parents and grandparents crossed paths with a number of luminaries, some of whom make cameos in this book. The French ethnologist Paul Rivet, for example, the founder of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, was Adler's thesis adviser and in letters excerpted here encouraged his interest in indigenous studies. Lomnitz's paternal grandfather knew Pablo Neruda and translated some of his poetry, his maternal grandparents were friends and neighbors of the Chilean songwriter and folk singer Violeta Parra, and for a time his parents lived next door to the Chilean novelist José Donoso, one of the leading figures of what Lomnitz calls "the so-called Latin American literary boom of the 1960s and 1970s." (Why "so-called" in reference to the generation of writers who thrust their work into the global canon? I would like to have had a fuller explanation.)

But the Lomnitz family's most profound and important relationship with a Latin American intellectual was clearly the one his maternal grandparents sustained with the Peruvian political philosopher, journalist, and labor organizer José Carlos Mariátegui. Even today Mariátegui, the author of the influential *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928), remains a towering figure in the history of the Latin American left, a homegrown peer of Gramsci or Lukács. Of mixed European and indigenous descent and largely self-educated, he became the chief theoretician of what came to be called indigenized Marxism, which has been seized upon in every country with a substantial population of what are known as *pueblos originarios* (original peoples) from Mexico to Argentina. The Shining Path guerrilla movement took its name from a phrase of Mariátegui's (Marxism is "the shining path to the future"), and his influence can also be detected in Mexico's Zapatista rebellion.

Lomnitz's grandparents frequented the literary/political salon Mariátegui hosted, mingling with workers and artists, and then went on to collaborate with him on the magazine *Amauta* (which means

“Wise Teacher” in Quechua, the main indigenous language of Peru). The Mexican writer Enrique Krauze has described that publication as “not just the most refined editorial expression of literary indigenism in Latin American history but also the crucible of a generation of intellectuals committed to the radical reform of their society.” Adler and Milstein were responsible for translating—there’s that word again—into Spanish essays originally written in Russian, German, or French by prominent European thinkers from Freud to Sorel.

When in 1929 they founded a magazine of their own, aimed at the Spanish-speaking Jewish diaspora and called *Repertorio Hebreo*, Mariátegui returned the favor by contributing to their first issue a fascinating essay entitled “Israel and the West, Israel and the World.” In it, he took a notably philo-Semitic tone very much in line with his own universalist aspirations. He started by positing that the Jewish people are singularly equipped “to assist, through its ecumenical and cosmopolitan activity, in the advent of a universal civilization” and concluded on a similar note: “If Jews can believe that they are destined for something, it must be to act as the yeast in the rise of a new international society.”

Adler and Milstein had the good fortune to arrive in South America just as societies there were embarking on a new round in the never-ending debate about their true and proper identities, and Lomnitz does a masterful job of conveying that intellectual ferment. Throughout the continent, idealistic young intellectuals were contemplating how to make their half-formed societies truly modern, which is to say more just and egalitarian. In his diaries, the Polish émigré Witold Gombrowicz once described Argentina as “batter that has not yet become cake,” and so it is instructive to see Mariátegui also resorting to a baking metaphor. That debate persists today, as demonstrated by recent presidential elections in Peru and Ecuador, marked by the stunning success of indigenous parties and candidates.

Mariátegui’s generous utopianism, it turns out, furnishes the real significance of the book’s title, directly expressed in a letter the Argentine novelist, poet, Socialist Party leader, and advocate of pan-Latin Americanism Manuel Ugarte sent to Adler upon receipt of Mariátegui’s essay. “The new spirit that begins to animate the life of each one of our republics rejects selfish prejudices and traditional hatreds,” he wrote. “It promises to bring about the broadest reconciliation of all the inhabitants of our America under the sign of justice and solidarity.”

Because of their association with Mariátegui, Adler and Milstein were arrested as alleged participants in an imaginary Bolshevik plot against the government and then expelled in 1930 from Peru, a country they had come to love. Mariátegui had died a few months earlier, of complications of the bone disease ankylosis, at the age of thirty-five, and Adler and Milstein spent the rest of the decade searching for a

new home, moving first to France and then to Romania before returning to South America and settling in Colombia. After World War II they moved to Israel, then went back to Colombia before finally settling in Venezuela, where Adler died in 1970 (immediately after Lomnitz's bar mitzvah there) and Milstein in 1976. At each stop along the way, there was another change of language, or a new culture to be absorbed and translated.

One of the great pleasures of *Nuestra América* is its vivid descriptions of ways of life once familiar in Latin America but largely unknown in the rest of the world and now vanished even in the places where they once flourished. Take, for example, the phenomenon of *el cláper*, or *klapper* in Yiddish, the itinerant peddlers who roamed the backlands, selling clothing and other goods on credit in remote villages that had no banks and little commerce. As a reporter in Latin America from the 1970s onward, I would occasionally meet older people whose first names were the surnames of a *klapper* who had befriended their parents, and who themselves had fond recollections of the peddler who was the source of their first toy.

On first arriving in Peru, Adler, having taught himself Spanish on the ship voyage over, was hired by a Sephardic merchant to be his intermediary with the teams of Eastern European *klappers* he employed, men who preferred to speak Yiddish, Russian, or Romanian when doing business. Lomnitz includes a startling photograph from the 1920s of a tall *klapper* surrounded by four diminutive indigenous helpers as he makes his rounds in the mining town of Cerro de Pasco, Peru, more than 14,000 feet up in the Andes, where the air is very thin.

But the *klappers* were not just a sociological curiosity. Many of them arrived in Latin America already politicized by the anti-Semitism they experienced in Europe, where they were active in various Zionist, socialist, or Bundist groups; constant exposure to the discrimination against the indigenous or black majorities that permeated their new societies radicalized them further and even drove some to become founding members of socialist and communist parties all over Latin America. Their more acculturated children inherited some of these beliefs, a process depicted in Alicia Freilich's novel *Cláper* (1998), about a Venezuelan peddler described as "a schlepper, a knocker on doors," and his politically engaged daughter.²

Lomnitz suggests that in the Andean countries to which his family migrated, newly arriving Jews felt a special affinity with the indigenous descendants of the Inca Empire. As he puts it, the jungles and mountains of South America "were a place in which cultures had persisted in ways that had an uncanny resonance—almost like a counterfactual—to the crumbling lifeworld of the shtetl." In a note he wrote to himself, Adler, who earned doctorates in philosophy (in Peru) and ethnology (in France), marveled that "groups of Indians managed to keep their languages alive, their religion, their cultural systems,

symbols, and mental and emotional faculties with regard to their sense of self and the world.” One can easily imagine the impact that the survival of a culture that predated and resisted Christian dominance would have had on young Jews in the interwar period.

Being in the New World was also disconcerting. Lomnitz recalls his grandfather telling him that “it was wonderful to arrive to a place where ‘no one knew what a Jew was’” and consequently to be simply called a Russian, German, or Pole, depending on one’s birthplace. Thus Jews “could blend in with the European minority to a considerable degree, and not be confused with Lima’s underclass of Indian, African, and Chinese migrants.”

This was in the 1920s, but after Hitler took power in 1933, conditions began to change. Homegrown fascist groups like the National Socialist Movement of Chile and the Integralists in Brazil proliferated, as did an overtly political anti-Semitism to accompany the clerical strain that had always existed in predominantly Roman Catholic countries with no effective wall between church and state. Lomnitz’s mother, Larissa, for example, boarded at a Catholic girls’ school in Colombia where her Jewish identity was kept secret from other students, and she attended mass daily.

Lomnitz’s father’s family was less peripatetic, at least compared with the Adlers and Milsteins, but equally accomplished. They presciently left Germany almost as soon as Hitler took power and settled in Brussels before moving to Chile in 1938. Lomnitz was born in Santiago in 1957, but the family left Chile well before Pinochet’s military coup of 1973, settling first in Berkeley, where his father—a geophysicist who had developed a formula for measuring the gradual deformation of rocks under sustained stress, known as Lomnitz’s creep law—taught at the University of California, and then in Mexico City. His mother was no less distinguished: a social anthropologist, she wrote books familiar to all Latin Americanists, such as *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown* (1977) and *Chile’s Political Culture and Parties* (2000).

As a child, Lomnitz asked his father, Cinna, to teach him German, his native tongue. Cinna declined, telling the boy that the only words he needed to know were *ja*, *nein*, and *Kartoffel* (potato). This resulted in what Lomnitz calls “a kind of intergenerational impoverishment,” since he also did not learn Russian or Yiddish. And when Claudio inquired about relatives who had perished in the Holocaust, his father claimed not to remember the names of any: “Was my father’s blocked memory an expression of trauma? Remorse? Desire to protect his children from fear and powerlessness, as he had himself been protected?” He notes that his father had always complained of his own mother’s overprotectiveness, and links her behavior to knowledge she had acquired through misfortune but chose not to inflict on her son.

About his own generation, Lomnitz can also be strategically reticent. He clearly adored his older brother and partner in boyhood adventures, Jorge: the cover photograph shows Jorge at about age seven, locked in a one-armed embrace with Claudio, three years younger. But it is only from the family tree that we discover that Jorge died in 1993, and no details of his passing are offered. When I searched online I learned that he was a distinguished geophysicist in Mexico, specializing in seismography, an important discipline in a country prone to earthquakes. In an obituary published in the Mexican literary magazine *Nexos*, Cinna Lomnitz describes his eldest son as a brilliant scientist and “intrepid spirit” but says merely that he “passed away at the age of 39, a victim of the after-effects of treatment for a malignant disease.”

The pain of losing a sibling, especially before old age, is devastating, and I can understand Lomnitz’s desire not to have to address it, having endured the same experience myself. But this is a book that is at least in part about family secrets and the author’s reaction to them. To his astonishment, Lomnitz discovers, for example, that the paternal great-grandfather after whom his father was named, Sina Aronsfrau, was murdered in Germany in 1922 by the same proto-Nazi gang that weeks later assassinated German foreign minister Walter Rathenau. Additionally, a maternal great-grandfather, Boris Milstein, may also have been murdered, during a period of political violence in Colombia in 1954—a detail that was also concealed from Lomnitz. He writes of growing up in an environment that was “at the same time so free and also so silently protected,” so it may induce pathos in the reader to see a pattern of withholding uncomfortable information—“strong doses of intergenerational amnesia” is Lomnitz’s preferred term—playing out yet again.

Lomnitz and I are of the same generation, and many of my Jewish friends throughout Latin America who are in our age group continue to grapple with issues of identity, albeit in forms their grandparents would have had difficulty grasping. They ask: Are we Jewish Latinos or Latino Jews? Which is the noun and which is the adjective? Lomnitz does not seem to be afflicted with these doubts, or if he is, he has chosen not to discuss them here, except when they concern language. Linguistically, he appears content to occupy a floating middle ground, “sandwiched between Spanish and English, feeling comfortable to a certain point in each of these languages, but also insecure in both.” For him, he adds, “linguistic displacement is a mark of origin.” All in all, not such a bad place to be, especially considering the alternatives his grandparents faced.

At the close of *Nuestra América*, Lomnitz tells us that he “ended up writing this book twice,” first in a Spanish-language version published in Mexico in 2018 and “now in this, deeply rewritten, English edition.” In view of his principal themes, it is significant that he does not refer to this American version as a “translation” but rather as an act of

“recalibrating my account for the ear of a different kind of reader.” In fact, he confides, he had in hand “a fine translation of the original Spanish text” done by someone else, which he used as a “baseline,” but in the end decided that “I simply could not offer English-language readers quite the same book.”

To scientists, as opposed to writers, the concept of “translation” embraces meanings that have nothing to do with literature or language. In aerodynamics, for example, the term refers to movement from one place to another by means of reaction power, while in other branches of physics it is applied to forms of nonrotational displacement. And in Euclidean geometry it is a form of transformation that moves every point of a figure the same distance in a given direction.

Lomnitz doesn’t say if he had these definitions in mind when he chose the subtitle for his book. But since both his father and his brother were geophysicists, they surely would have been familiar with the terminology. In any case, it certainly applies to the story he tells: both branches of the Lomnitz family were impelled by larger forces in Europe into motion toward the New World, where their displacement eventually transformed them into something they had not been before. The unanswerable question, of course, is this: Are Lomnitz and others like him now finally bodies at rest, or will they be acted upon again by some other unbalanced force?

Larry Rohter

Larry Rohter, the author of three books about Brazil, was formerly the Latin America Editor for *Newsweek* and a correspondent for *The New York Times* in Mexico, Central America, Brazil, and the Andean countries. (June 2021)

1. Reviewed in these pages by Sarah Lipton, December 3, 2020. ↵
2. First published in Spanish in 1987 by Planeta de Venezuela; an English translation by Joan E. Friedman was published by the University of New Mexico Press in 1998. The novel is part of a fascinating Jewish Latin America series edited by Ilan Stavans and well worth reading. So is Stavans’s *The Seventh Heaven: Travels in Jewish Latin America* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019). ↵