The emergence of the nation-state during the 19th century in Latin America signaled an era of freedom and independence in the region. The newly formed nations had in appearance attained a cultural unity within their borders, but, the ethnic struggles which had been more often than not accompanied by class struggles and the cultural diversity of the peoples inhabiting these territories, largely passed unnoticed. The New World had many cultures that did not share the same language, traditions or values; however, the national borders were in no way laid out by these distinctive traits, but—as many examples testify—by the unpredictable turns of history. For example, in the late 1830s, the precarious form of federalism that was in place in Central America collapsed; as a result, the States of Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Costa Rica emerged. Likewise, the Gran Colombia, a federation comprised by Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador did not hold together as Simón Bolívar (1783-1830)—the leader of their independence and who could very well be considered the father of nationalism in Latin America—hoped, and that is why these countries exist today. At the same time, the institutions set up by the nation-states, and the creation of national symbols, highly contributed to the formation of a national culture. It is evident, then, that since the period of independence, those supporting the creation of the nation-state and the ideology of nationalism have attempted to carry out a process of conceptual homogenization that has been somewhat successful in Uruguay and Argentina, but mostly unsuccessful everywhere else. As we live in the era of post-nationalism due to
globalization, it is worthwhile to pose the following question: What will be the fate of the cultures (ethnic minorities and the like, and in some cases displaced majorities) in Latin America as the nation-state stands on shaky grounds due to a new world order? The following pages will attempt to answer this crucial question.

In many Latin American countries we find a vast array of cultures and languages, but their diversity has been often overlooked because of the idea of homogeneity encompassed by the nation-state. In addition, by helping to spread the sentiment of nationalism, national symbols such as flags, national anthems, and at times an “official” language, have also contributed to this notion of unity. Thus seen, the national symbols have had two main functions: to represent the apparent unity of the nation-state and to awaken ideological feelings of nationalism. On the other hand, one must not forget that these national symbols have been created in order to establish control and power. As John Lynch has convincingly argued, “in so far as there was a nation it was a creole nation, for the castes had only an obscure sense of national identity, and the Indians and Negros none at all” (Lynch 25). Despite all this, nationhood made possible the creation of new traditions, and in a way, the creation of a new history. According to Eric Hobsbawm, “inventing traditions is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition” (The invention 4). In this sense, the wave of nationalism enabled the construction of new borders in Latin America, but the map was based more on geography than on spirit; more on force and happenstance than on a real sense of social integration in each of the countries involved. The rise of nationhood in the early 19th century brought forth a positive and a negative outcome. Positively speaking, it provided the region with a sense of identity through its independence, but negatively, such identity created an illusion of homogeneity that the region lacks even to this date. There were two main actors in this process of homogenization: the Europeans
and the native creoles. Europe provided very well constituted models of cultural identities encompassed in the idea of the nation-state. Also, the native creoles carried out the final plan to build a national culture. Although the colonizers implemented a wide process of homogenization by way of language, customs, religion and even ethnic cleansing, they largely overlooked the internal cultural differences among the indigenous peoples. The archeological sites found all along the subcontinent clearly reveal the dazzling degrees of development and differences between the cultures therein. A more vigorous and sweeping process of ideological and cultural homogenization was to take place during and after the independence of the colonies. Simón Bolívar hints at the possibility that the whole subcontinent could have become one nation:

It is a grandiose idea to think of consolidating the New World into a single nation, united by pacts into a single bond. It is reasoned that, as these parts have a common origin, language, customs, and religion, they ought to have a single government to permit the newly formed states to unite in a confederation. But this is not possible. Actually, America is separated by climatic differences, geographic diversity, conflicting interests, and dissimilar characteristics. (118)

Although the colonizers had in fact continuously presented the region as a homogeneous “imagined community,” this community was not in any way united by language, heritage, or for that matter, culture, which would encompass a set of histories and traditions. It is surprising, however, that Bolívar would have placed more emphasis on the “climatic” and “geographic” differences, while failing to recognize the prevailing cultural and historical boundaries. What he hand in mind was an aborted attempt at homogenization, somewhat supported by the unifying power of the land. The land gave Spaniards and creoles alike, the impression that the New World was inhabited by peoples with the same origin; but, the two main concentrations of peoples (Mesoamerica and the Andes) prior to the conquest, attest to the fact that any notion of cultural, ethnic or linguistic unity is nonsense. For this reason, we can interpret Bolívar’s characterization in two ways: as an oversight
with regards to the internal differences of the region, or, having borne these differences in mind, as an attempt to homogenize the community of the New World through the dominant culture; that is: by language (Spanish), religion (Catholicism) and geography. This oversight can also be considered a “postcolonial amnesia [which] is symptomatic of the urge for historical self-invention or the need to make a new start—to erase painful memories of colonial subordination” (Ghandi 4). However, “histories, much as families, cannot be freely chosen by a simple act of will, and newly emergent postcolonial nation-states are often deluded and unsuccessful in their attempts to disown the burdens of their colonial inheritance. The mere repression of colonial memories is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing of or emancipation from the uncomfortable realities of the colonial encounter” (Ghandi 4).

The prevailing cultural and historical differences of the New World did not disappear, these differences are alive in contemporary Latin America and are depicted very well in Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude*:

> Our territory is inhabited by a number of races speaking different languages and living on different historical levels. (11-12)

Although Paz’s observations refer to Mexico alone, they perfectly fit the reality of Latin America in general: different histories, different landscapes (spaces) and different peoples. For the Mexican author, myths are the essential components of any culture, because they determine its present. As he writes, “myths and fiestas, whether secular or religious, permit man to emerge from his solitude and become one with creation. Therefore myth —disguised, obscure, hidden— reappears in almost all our acts and intervenes decisively in our history: it opens the doors of communion” (Paz 211).

When examining the five prime features which would engender a sense of national identity according to Anthony Smith (1. an historic territory or homeland; 2. common myths and historical
memories; 3. a common mass public culture; 4. common legal rights and duties for all members and 5. a common economy) (National Identity 14), we would also realize how far Latin America is and was from such national unity. Geography was, according to Bolívar himself, the most relevant and obvious border in the pre-national era; and as Lynch observes, “nature reinforced the divisions imposed by man” (25). Also, for Bourdieu, “to exist within a social space, to occupy a point or to be an individual within a social space, is to differ, to be different” (Practical Reason 9). These natural borders made different indigenous communities unaware of one another; therefore, the notion of common “myths and historical memories” is very much out of the question. With regards to the common “mass public culture” and common “legal rights,” one can see that the pre-national regions were not in any way culturally connected before the arrival of the colonizers; and afterwards, the relationship was common to the extent that one can call it a post-colonial community. So, in no way were they guided by common goals, educationally or legally speaking. Finally, it was obvious that from the outset, achieving a “common economy” was not the main purpose of the Latin American region. How, then, was this idea of one nation ever entertained? On the one hand, it was relatively easy to uphold such a notion based on territorial unity. In the eyes of the Europeans, the New World presented itself uniformly, which we can trace to the unity of the land and to the “otherness” of the people. On the other hand, despite the great differences among the peoples of the New World, they gave the impression of being just one group: easily defeatable —militarily speaking— and easily convertible to Catholicism. As the colonizers failed to treat these differences with any kind of deference, the internal elite in the colonies also failed to safeguard these diverse cultural heritages. Bolívar’s oversight was but a sample of what was yet to come; as Héctor García Canclini has observed:
The liberal oligarchies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries acted as if they constituted States, but they only ordered some areas of society in order to promote a subordinate and inconsistent development; they acted as if they formed national cultures, and they barely constructed elite cultures, leaving out an enormous indigenous and peasant population . . . . (7)

Therefore, the attempt to conceive Latin America as one nation, is just a figment of those whose awareness of independence was strongly and well founded, but with a limited understanding of the diverse cultural totality. And, if the concept of one nation cannot be applicable to the whole subcontinent, interestingly enough, it is not applicable to any nation in particular either. As nationhood has become a worldwide standard of social organization, cultures are expected to evolve within very specific borders; these borders help to create a sense of a national culture and to generate a system of meaning and value. As Anthony Smith considers:

> nationalism must be seen as a form of historicist culture and civic education, one that overlays or replaces the older modes of religious culture and familial education. More than a style and doctrine of politics, nationalism is a form of culture—an ideology, a language, mythology, symbolism and consciousness—that has achieved global resonance, and the nation is a type of identity whose meaning and priority is presupposed by this form of culture. (National 91-92)

During and after the period of independence, Latin America was swept by the ideology of “americanism”, which can be seen as a wave of nationalism in its embryonic form. This “americanism” primarily exercised an ideological medium of representation, whereby writers and artists in general used Latin American themes as their only workable topic of artistic expression. Although not essentially rooted in nationalistic principles, the literary “americanism” is based on the idea that the subcontinent is unitary, homogeneous and aesthetically superior than Europe and the United States. This trend highly determined the origin and development of what we call today “Latin American culture” and “literature.” Even though this trend struggled for ideological dominance since the colonial period, it was after the political independence in the 19th century
when it was able to flourish thanks to the basic premise of political and cultural emancipation. This idea stimulated intellectuals to develop a continental theme, highlighting the ethnic, geographical and historical importance of the region. That is, the cultural space acquired an *a priori* positive value, which inaugurated a whole line of cultural production. However, this trend affected negatively the literary production, because it reduced literature to a tautological representation of the subcontinent. Therefore, the “americanism” appears as an aesthetic trend, but its function was primarily psychological, political and ideological. The literary creation, in this way, functioned as a cultural border like that created by the nation-state. In Bolívar’s famous “Carta de Jamaica” we read:

> We are a young people. We inhabit a world apart, separated by broad seas. We are young in the ways of almost all the arts and sciences, although, in a certain manner, we are old in the ways of civilized society. I look upon the present state of America as similar to that of Rome after its fall. Each part of Rome adopted a political system conforming to its interest and situation or was led by the individual ambitions of certain chiefs, dynasties, or associations. But this important *difference* exists: those dispersed parts later established their ancient *nations*, subject to the changes imposed by circumstances or events. But *we* scarcely retain a vestige of what once was; *we* are, moreover, neither Indian nor European, but a species midway between the legitimate proprietors of this country and the Spanish usurpers [emphasis added]. (110)

Bolívar’s emphasis on the personal pronoun “we” is overtly expressed. He highlights a cultural border, and establishes an independent territory despite the historical continuity and interdependence between America and Europe. By using this pronoun, he attempts to create a rupture that generates—at least ideologically—differences which may function like a national border; this pronoun also denotes a group which separates and unifies the speaker, and gives him or her a homogeneous and reliable identity. However, the pronoun does not incorporate any particular group but the voice of the writer himself; that is to say, the “we” disguises the self and the identity of the author. That is, it conceals Bolívar’s personal ideological maneuvers to operate
at the discursive level, as well as the level of reality. Consequently, in a newly constituted territory and in search of an identity, writings like Bolívar’s greatly contributed to such enterprise. As Anthony Smith asserts, “as a doctrine of culture and symbolic language and consciousness, nationalism’s primary concern is to create a world of collective cultural identities or cultural nations” (National 99).

The formation of the modern nation-state in Latin America based in part on Bolívar’s actions and philosophical principles, had a major impact on the cultures of the region. One can very well say that as a consequence of nationhood, all cultures were nationalized and seen as a representation of the nation. Notwithstanding, the shifting meaning and relevance of the nation worldwide due to the era of globalization, has further unveiled the ideological principles of cultural nationalism. Globalization is the current universal force that is rapidly changing the ways through which the production of commodities, and their consumption and distribution occur worldwide. As the world is becoming more unified due to different forms of global integration, the circulation of commodities, individuals, ideas, news, images, scientific discoveries and electronic data is less restricted. This occurs at a time of unprecedented technological revolution which has made possible—in part because of the World Wide Web—new venues of dialogue and transfer of information; but most significantly, this revolution has made possible the conception and creation of virtual spaces. This new form of spatial redistribution has radically modified the way people relate to one another, as well as the way people perceive and interact with reality. In other words, the physical reality is being challenged as the main receptacle of social interaction. While real spaces are transformed and dissociated from their original location, virtual spaces gain more acceptance and importance within the world community. The creation of a virtual space clearly undermines geography’s preeminence for the development and mapping of a culture. Furthermore, the virtual
space engenders a new form of culture; one that need not be attached to a geographical location. Hence, globalization shows that nations and cultures are not naturally joined, nor will they develop proportionally.

Thus, the notion of a global culture incorporates other sets of issues that are not necessarily tied to a specific geographical region. As a result, different cultures within nations would be able to interact in ways that put into question the relevance of the nation-state as the main actor or intermediary for general communication. At the same time, the dissociation of time and space inevitably generates a new global culture, but it cannot erase altogether the culture and cultures— in the most general sense— that have given way to the advent of nationalism. In addition, this reshuffling of the space makes it more difficult to interpret our human realities as a product or influence of center/periphery, North/South and East/West phenomena. The technological advancements in the era of globalization will make evident that the role of the nation-state during the 21st Century will be largely diminished. Therefore, former cultures that have shaped the nation-state, despite their divergence and heterogeneity, will gain a relatively independent venue to represent themselves beyond the constraints of the nation, but, this new way will be dictated by economics and not by their cultural beliefs. In this sense, “culture as spirituality is eroded by culture as the [sic] commodity” (Eagleton 72).
Bibliography


