



Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Porfirian Mexico and the Cultural Politics of Empire

Jason Ruiz

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When railroads connected the United States and Mexico in 1884 and overland travel between the two countries became easier and cheaper, Americans developed an intense curiosity about Mexico, its people, and its opportunities for business and pleasure. Indeed, so many Americans visited Mexico during the Porfiriato (the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, 1876–1911) that observers on both sides of the border called the hordes of tourists and business speculators a “foreign invasion,” an apt phrase for a historical moment when the United States was expanding its territory and influence.

Americans in the Treasure House examines travel to Mexico during the Porfiriato, concentrating on the role of travelers in shaping ideas of Mexico as a logical place for Americans to extend their economic and cultural influence in the hemisphere. Analyzing a wealth of evidence ranging from travelogues and literary representations to picture postcards and snapshots, Jason Ruiz demonstrates that American travelers constructed Mexico as a nation at the cusp of modernity, but one requiring foreign intervention to reach its full potential. He shows how they rationalized this supposed need for intervention in a variety of ways, including by representing Mexico as a nation that deviated too dramatically from American ideals of progress, whiteness, and sexual self-control to become a modern “sister republic” on its own. Most importantly, Ruiz relates the rapid rise in travel and travel discourse to complex questions about national identity, state power, and economic relations across the U.S.–Mexico border.

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