

“The Advantages of Knowing How to Read and Write:” Literacy, Filmic Pedagogies, and the Hemispheric Projection of US Influence

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In his December 1940 “Arsenal of Democracy” fireside chat, Franklin Delano Roosevelt warned listeners that Axis aggression posed a grave threat to the American hemisphere. One year later, the United States experienced that hemispheric risk first hand at Pearl Harbor. Halfway between those two attention-calling moments, the demands of hemispheric security precipitated a less military sort of action: an educational partnership aimed at enacting Roosevelt’s call for a democratic arsenal that would defend not just the United States but the whole of the Americas. Starting in June 1941, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) and the Walt Disney Company made a series of films projecting good neighborliness and benign development southward across the hemisphere. The partnership resulted in animated features, good-will tours, and training filmstrips, all aiming to “strengthen the bonds between the United States and the other American Republics” at a time when such bonds were critical and in doubt (“Memorandum” 1).

While the feature films *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros* are the best-known outcomes of the partnership between Disney and the OIAA, the educational films they produced circulated nearly as widely. Those films, which Disney later described as “edutainment,” combined audience appeal and instructional purpose to address matters of health, development, literacy, and history (Van Riper 2). However, they were above all concerned with promoting hemispheric union. Some even carried tellingly “American” titles (e.g., “Health for the Americas” and “Reading for the Americas”), and their narration was often well salted with the language of American values.

Matters of transhemispheric movement infused almost every aspect of the Disney-OIAA films. In service of the OIAA’s goals (and Disney’s commercial interests), the films and their creators traveled widely, strengthening bonds with allied American republics and seeking to entice more recalcitrant ones. The films themselves were shown in classrooms from the United States to Argentina, from Guayaquil, Ecuador, to Rio di Janeiro, Brazil. Walt Disney animators, US-based educators, and OIAA employees traversed the Americas gathering sources and promoting US interests. Latin American artists and musicians and their creative work traveled northward to enrich the American visions

that Disney and the OIAA circulated.¹ Latin American political elites and civic leaders welcomed OIAA delegations and sent reactions north to the Office of the Coordinator. Articles published in Latin American newspapers made their way back to Washington, DC, where they were translated and placed in the files of the OIAA. In the midst of all that circulation, caught in the glare of inter-American cooperation and US technical expertise, the average Latin American appeared resolutely immobile, a subject always in need of education and development.

That contrast between a mobile, modern United States and a stagnant Latin America is poignantly visible in the materials at the heart of this article: the archives of a Disney-OIAA literacy and hygiene project that flourished briefly toward the end of World War II. While the OIAA and Walt Disney touted their goal of reaching every Latin American citizen with film-based literacy training, their depiction of those recipients as passive and a-modern marked them always as literacy's others and, consequently, as America's others.

Engaging that Disney-OIAA literacy project, this essay illuminates how literacy and film served the US government as “navigational technolog[ies]” that directed and constrained access to modern mobility (Vieira, “Consequences” 27). Produced in a moment when literacy, democracy, and development were tightly linked in popular discourse and literacy scholarship, the Disney-OIAA literacy films carried the assumption of US expertise in modern life outward to the “other American republics” (e.g., Bromage, Gross, Lynde). Literacy became [US] American property in much the way that Prendergast sees literacy emerge as white property within the United States (7-8). Ultimately, though US officials imagined filmic literacy linking the Americas through common values, their always pre-existing claim to literacy simultaneously reinscribed familiar hierarchies that placed the United States at the head of the hemisphere.

In addressing how themes of movement and stagnation pervade the Disney-OIAA literacy project, we call attention to the intertwined possibilities and consequences of literate mobility. We build on scholarship in literacy studies and transnational rhetorics, approaching the Disney-OIAA literacy campaign as a matter of both educational practice and political purpose, as a means of projecting both local skills and wide-ranging ideological import (e.g., Vieira, “American by Paper”; Brandt and Clinton; Lorimer Leonard; Dingo, *Networking*; C. Olson, “Contradictions of Progress”; L. Olson,). Recent discussions of literacy's consequences have moved us productively beyond the terms of the literacy myth and into the question of literacy's social and material effects on those relegated to the category of “illiterate” (e.g., Brandt; Mortensen, “Figuring Illiteracy,” “Reading Material”; Prendergast; Prendergast, and Ličko; Stuckey; Vieira, “American”). Extending that conversation into Latin America, we suggest that under a developmentalist frame, literacy education creates literacy's others even as it seeks to extend literacy. In that paradigm, literacy moves and prevents movement; it circulates and constrains access to circulation.

The coming pages offer first a general overview of the OIAA and its partnership with Disney, highlighting the hemispheric spirit mobilized by both organizations to serve US interests. Then, turning to the 1943-45 Disney-OIAA literacy project, we examine the specific literate mechanisms of that transnational nationalism. As OIAA staff, Disney animators, literacy experts, and local respondents discussed the goals and implementation of their work, the particulars of literacy

and pedagogy were subsumed to ideologically inflected matters of modernity, development, and efficiency. Ultimately, the "advantages of knowing how to read and write" so touted by the films became advantages that accrued primarily to those in the North and in each American republic who were already established as *letrados*, *modernos*, and *Americanos* (Alstock).

HEMISPHERIC UNITY AND MOVING PICTURES

The Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs was created by executive order on July 30, 1941.² The agency, housed within the Office for Emergency Management, was headed by Nelson A. Rockefeller through the bulk of World War II.³ In response to the threat of Axis economic, cultural, and political influence in Latin America, the OIAA was charged to "formulate, recommend, and execute programs in the commercial and economic fields which, by the effective use of governmental and private facilities, will further the commercial well-being of the Western Hemisphere" and promote the "effective realization of the basic cultural and commercial objectives of the Government's program of hemisphere solidarity" (Roosevelt, "Executive"). Concerned, as Roosevelt had suggested in the "Arsenal of Democracy," that Axis intervention anywhere in the American hemisphere would pose a significant threat to US security, the OIAA was to promote political stability, commercial cooperation, and democratic solidarity throughout the Americas. Through propaganda campaigns, "Coordination Committees" staffed by US citizens living abroad, and educational projects, the OIAA amplified Roosevelt's Good Neighbor message across the continent. After the war, responsibility for Inter-American Affairs was absorbed into the State Department, and the OIAA ceased to exist. In the intervening years, the OIAA was a small but far-reaching agent of hemispheric influence. It facilitated both "softer methods of persuasion and attraction and harder strategies of coercion to achieve given foreign policy goals" (Cramer and Prutsch 806).

While the activities that fell under the OIAA's responsibility shifted over time, the agency's most consistent role was rhetorical coordination. Throughout the war it maintained "a watchful eye on Axis nationals and sympathizers, particularly in the media and communication sector" (Cramer and Prutsch 791). While the agency had some covert responsibilities, "information and propaganda was ... one of its most important assignments throughout the war" (794). The OIAA "employed some two hundred journalists, editors, translators, visual artists, photographers, and clerks, and it turned out a large variety of publications, including posters, pamphlets, comics, journals, and magazines" (794). It also "employed some of [Communication Studies]' foremost researchers to gauge public opinion in Latin America and to devise propaganda strategies to achieve specific objectives" (802).

In 1942, Rockefeller extended the OIAA's responsibilities outward in a public call to educators for a "union of our intellectual forces" to produce "an American renaissance of unlimited possibilities" that would engulf the entire American hemisphere (Rockefeller 143). That project demanded a broad-based effort to educate people in the United States about their Southern neighbors. Rockefeller asserted, "We need the aid of parents ... the assistance of Boards of Education and of our schools and colleges" to increase the US public's awareness of Latin America (Rockefeller 143). Reaching audiences in the other American republics required an equally wide-ranging effort. So, the OIAA

was given a mandate that included responsibility for facilitating activities among “such fields as the arts and sciences, education and travel, the radio, the press, and the cinema” in order to disseminate a [US] American message across the continents (Roosevelt, “Executive”). The collaboration with Disney at the heart of this essay was just one part of that dissemination, but it was a particularly natural partnership given the Walt Disney Company’s own interest in education, its global reach, and its fascination with American values.

Walt Disney believed that film could provide social benefit and argued regularly that its capacity for entertainment was a natural aid to education. After the war, he reflected that “[t]he generation that used the motion picture to help train its fighters and its workers into the mightiest nation in history, is not apt to ignore the motion picture as an essential tool in the labor of enlightenment, civilization, and peace” (Disney 125). Though that “essential tool” could not operate on its own—“educational pictures merely offer a new tool for the educator’s kit”—it was inextricably and evocatively tied to modernity (Disney 122). Because of the exigency of war, Disney asserted, “we have been compelled to reject any move that had no purpose, any method that was cumbersome or slow, any means that could not guarantee results. The watchword was to retain whatever was efficient and swift, and to cast off whatever was not effective” (Disney 119). The motion picture, under this rubric, was a model for modern education. It “took a leading part in all phases of wartime education—propaganda and information as well as training. It explained and supported ideas, it showed with impartial fidelity the course of events, it made hidden phenomena visible, and it demonstrated the way to control them” (Disney 119). For Disney, films’ capacity for unveiling truths, circulating knowledge, and connecting people was unmatched and synecdochally connected to modern power. Added to the toolkit of the United States, films gave greater heft to the prowess of the emerging superpower.

The OIAA was not the first or the only US government agency to contract with the Walt Disney Company during the war years. Disney produced training films for the armed services, propaganda films for circulation within the United States and abroad, and edutainment shorts for the civilian population. By 1943, government and military contracts accounted for ninety-four percent of Disney’s output (Roe 15). Walt Disney was a fierce advocate for [US] American values and a savvy businessman. His relationship with the US government served both purposes. Disney films projected “the unmixed blessings of technology, the exceptional status of the United States, the benevolence of authority figures and the virtues of submitting to them” (Van Riper 2). These ideas were “preached, openly and explicitly, in Disney edutainment films” (Van Riper 2). The films fit neatly into a worldview where US values and US good will were paramount.

American ideals of capitalist success and business efficiency also permeated Disney’s relationship with the OIAA. In a prefatory interview appended to the 1942 documentary *South of the Border with Disney* that showcased that partnership, Disney notes that the films they produced needed no government subsidy: “that little thing went out and it did a heck of a business and the United States government didn’t have to put up one nickel . . . it was actually a good will tour for the government” (*South of the Border*). Disney’s claim to have needed no subsidy is questionable, given that the OIAA paid for Disney’s expenses and equipment for the good-will tours. At the same time, OIAA officials recognized the larger benefits accruing from collaboration with the Walt Disney Company, thanks to

the font of good feeling that Disney and his work could provide and that the United States desperately needed in Latin America. Both Disney's tour and the films he produced would tether "Disney's good will and prestige which are unique the world over" to the interests of the United States of America (*Project Authorization*, 4). That effort to provide a pleasing Disney facade to US government activities wasn't always successful, but it was a key strategy in disseminating [US] American visions and [US] American interests widely across the hemisphere.

"READING FOR THE AMERICAS"

Disney and the OIAA formalized their shared motion picture work starting in the summer of 1941. Their effort to combat illiteracy in the other American republics began somewhat later, on the suggestion of Dr. Enrique Sánchez de Lozada, a Latin American exile who had organized previous social campaigns in his native Bolivia and was hired by Rockefeller as a speechwriter and regional expert. Interested in promoting education and development in Latin America, de Lozada recommended in October 1942 that the OIAA embark on a literacy campaign in cooperation with the other American republics. De Lozada was specifically interested in film's ability to disseminate literacy more widely than traditional methods made possible, and the OIAA turned to Disney "in view of the high calibre of the training films and materials produced by the Walt Disney Studios for the Army and Navy" (de Lozada 1).

The next step in the process—a seminar on literacy education held in May and June 1943 with educators from both Latin America and the United States—examined an array of possible teaching methods, including the use of audio-visual material. De Lozada's original proposal had been to include "about ten Latin American illiteracy experts" and "an equal number of outstanding teachers and technicians in the United States" (de Lozada 1).⁴ It is unclear from available records exactly who ultimately participated in the seminar, but it is possible they included some of the experts who later advised the project: Mexican teachers Eulalia Guzman (who directed a Mexican literacy campaign in 1923), Estele Soni (Director of the Escuela Cristobal Colon), Guadalupe Cejudo (Supervisor of Schools in Mexico City), and "Professor Piña" (an "adult education specialist ... of Indian extraction"); US educators Dr. Mildred Wiese, ("authority on the teaching of adult illiterates in the US"), Dr. George Sánchez ("professor of education, University of Texas"), Eleanor Clark ("representative of the Motion Picture Division"), Dr. Antonio Rebollado ("Professor of Education of Highlands University, New Mexico"); and Puerto Rican professor Dr. Ismael Rodríguez Bou (Superior Council of Education, University of Puerto Rico) (de Lozada 5; Cutting Personnel-9).⁵

Based on the outcomes of the Summer 1943 seminar, de Lozada urged a joint Latin American-US literacy project in which films were "the central device ... strengthened with related printed material, recordings and slides" ("Adult Literacy in the American Republics," qtd. in de Lozada 1). Even in that early articulation, the use of film was believed to promise greater efficiency (it would reduce the need for specially trained teachers) and access to modernity (in addition to teaching reading and writing, the films would "impart some practical simple improvement in the students' knowledge of living") (de Lozada 1-2).

Over the next year and a half, Disney and the OIAA put together a panel of advisors; produced a series of four films designed to teach reading, writing, and hygiene; and prepared a testing program intended to assess the effectiveness of the films. The six films to be shown as part of the testing program included two shorts drawn from the “Health for the Americas” series—“The Human Body” and “The Unseen Enemy”—and four made specifically for the “Reading for the Americas” project—“La Historia de José” and “La Historia de Ramón,” each in two parts. In the reading films, new Disney characters José and Ramón taught reading and writing through their health and hygiene choices. José, a light-skinned, clean-shaven, well-muscled young man who OIAA employee Ryland Madison describes as “the strong, aggressive, alert type of person,” “eats well” and so learns well. On the other hand, flabby, dark-skinned, mustachioed Ramón, as the title of his second film declares, “is sick.” His “inferiority complex” and insipid personality combine with bad hygiene habits to leave him well behind the accomplishments of his adept, healthy, educated counterpart (Madison, “Can Films” 3). As the films introduced their main characters, descriptions of their actions “flashed on the screen a whole sentence at a time” and then were “repeated slowly by the sound device” while the audience joined in (Albornoz 28). The goal was for audience members to recognize the written words as they spoke them aloud and then associate those words with the Disney characters and their actions while also picking up basic health habits.

It is worth noting that this manner of teaching Spanish-language literacy was itself both a source of controversy and a point of pride for the Disney-OIAA organizers. Their commitment to film as a vehicle for technical modernity influenced their pedagogical choices, particularly the decision to teach reading using the “modernized global method,” rather than the phonetic method used by Latin American educators.⁶ In that method, Madison explains enthusiastically, “whole sentences are first learned, then broken down into individual words, rather than the phonetic system of teaching whole vowels and letters to develop word pictures” (“Can Films” 1). This emphasis on modern pedagogy—in both method and medium—did not go unquestioned, however. In a memo written after an April 1943 trip to Mexico, John Cutting—who appears to have been an OIAA staff member—criticized the choice of the global method as blatantly disregarding Latin American expertise in the teaching of their own language. Cutting explained, acerbically, that “the Ministry of Education in Mexico is using the method they are ... not because they are living in the Dark Ages and are ill-informed about modern teaching methods; but because they have found that definite results are achieved by the work they are doing” (7). Despite such objections, however, the film program proceeded with the global method. As accounts of the program make clear, Disney and OIAA staff saw that pedagogical approach as part of a new and more efficient style that was linked inextricably to the equally modern efficiency of the motion picture.

To corroborate that belief in pedagogical and technological innovation, OIAA staff turned to a wide array of mostly US-based experts in education and literacy to evaluate the quality of the “Reading for the Americas” films. Those outside consultants—university professors, literacy educators with international experience, and executives from educational film programs—consistently supported OIAA claims that film was well-suited to literacy instruction and applauded the methods. In addition to providing the entertainment and motivation presumed to be necessary for the program’s

prospective students, they argued, film's sequential nature fit well with the requirements of reading pedagogy. Dr. William S. Gray, described in OIAA material as an "authority on the teaching of reading," for example, emphasized that each film should be devoted to "a specific step in the teaching of reading" (E. Clark, "Literacy Film Showings" 2). He offered to send a list of these steps and their proper order, presenting learning to read as a universal process that would proceed in an orderly and linear fashion. Film equally linear and orderly form provided an ideal medium through which to disseminate that step-by-step literacy.

Film also appealed to experts like Gray and Dr. Mildred Wiese because it allowed the teaching of reading to be systematized and standardized in classrooms across Latin America. While official, public-oriented documents produced by the OIAA emphasized the role of Latin American educators in developing and implementing literacy instruction, internal discussions among OIAA staff and the US-based consultants they engaged showed substantial skepticism about relying on instructor expertise. They tended to position the films themselves as the central vehicles for literacy learning, with instructors playing only a limited role, typically restricted to guiding discussion of material presented by film. Moreover, these US-based experts tended to have a dim view of the training and ability of Latin American teachers. They noted, for example, that one of the benefits of films in which the steps for learning reading were presented sequentially was that "the teacher learns the methodology as she teaches" (E. Clark, "Literacy Film Showings" 1). These pedagogical experts preferred, in other words, to trust the authority of US-made films rather than fallible teachers to correctly transfer literacy knowledge to students. Inherently modern and literate, film, it seems, could be relied on to carry accurate, systematic instruction throughout the Americas.⁷

Equipped with what they believed to be cutting edge technology and pedagogy, the staff of the Disney-OIAA literacy pilot project headed south in the summer of 1944. They showed the six pilot films to large audiences in Mexico, Honduras, and Ecuador. Eleanor Clark and Dr. Rodríguez Bou were the primary OIAA point people for the testing phase, traveling to Latin America in July 1944 to make preliminary arrangements. They were joined in Mexico later that year by Dr. Ryland Madison—representing the health and sanitation division of the OIAA—, Dr. Antonio Rebolledo—professor of education—, and Daniel MacManus—a Disney animator ("Regarding" 1). Over the course of a three week testing period in Mexico, the films were shown to "nearly 5,000 people," including army conscripts, school children, and adults and children in a manufacturing town and a rural area (Madison, "Results" 1). These communities were chosen because they made up "a representative cross-section of Mexico" (Madison, "Can Films" 3). Before the film screenings, audiences were tested on both general health knowledge and literacy skills, with the same tests repeated after the films were shown. For the group of conscripts, both sets of films were shown repeatedly, with the health films screened three times and the literacy films four times (2-3).

Subsequently, the testing program moved to Honduras and then to Ecuador. There is little information available about the Honduras pilot, but the tests in Ecuador were well documented by the OIAA, largely thanks to their positive reception in the Ecuadorian press. There, the Disney-OIAA group collaborated with a literacy-training program operated by the Ecuadorian Journalists Union (UNP, Unión Nacional de Periodistas). That partnership aligned the developmentalist interests of

the United States with those of Ecuador's elites, and may be responsible for the glowing terms in which Ecuadorian journalists portrayed the pilot's success. In Ecuador, the films were shown to some 6,500 people in fifteen provinces ("6.500"). For showings in Quito, the audience included military conscripts, indigenous laborers, and convicts—not a representative sample of the population, but certainly indicative of how the OIAA and their Ecuadorian partners pictured the population of illiterate American others ("New Method").

Early reports on the success of the pilot project were overwhelmingly positive. The Mexican portion of the testing concluded on September 15, 1944, and a memo from Madison dated September 16 eagerly asserts that "both the Health films and the Literacy films have been successful far beyond our expectations" ("Results" 1). Madison describes the audiences as "tremendously enthusiastic" and goes on to explain that Mexican government officials present at the screenings were similarly impressed ("Results" 1,3). A month later, a newspaper article published in Ecuador touted the efficient pedagogy that film provided, noting "This new method makes the teaching of reading easy because it does not require the illiterate person to submit to the slow process of learning to read letter by letter." The article praised the project as, "one more method available to incorporate large groups of literates into the great group of civilized people in the world, thus fulfilling a dictate of humanity and social service" ("Important Motion Pictures"; "Demonstration"). After the testing finished in Ecuador, an article that circulated first to US diplomats and then to potential English-speaking tourists described the success of even just one film session as a "personal miracle" for the attendees (Albornoz 28). Those enthusiastic celebrations of the literacy project spoke readily to the existing assumptions of US audiences. They relied on a synecdochic movement in which acquisition of literacy and hygiene stood in for a larger encounter with the progressive energy of [US] American life. That such skills were attained through the bright light of film only amplified the power of that synecdochic modernity.

MOVING LITERACY, IMMOBILIZING LATIN AMERICA

Perhaps not surprisingly, the "Reading for the Americas" project inspired copious amounts of writing in its short life. OIAA and Disney staff, US and Latin American educators, and Latin American journalists and diplomats all helped the Disney-OIAA films move across the hemisphere through the words they composed about it. These interlocutors, though speaking to varied goals and audiences, consistently imagined the literacy project in service to modern development, national pride, and hemispheric union. Because the film-literacy project provided an opportunity to spread US American assumptions about hemispheric unity and democratic progress across the hemisphere, it also did important work in furthering the larger aims of the OIAA. In internal reports, public presentations, and local responses literacy education was imagined as a means of performing American unity. It tied governments together and fostered human development. It gave elites across the continents a common role and a common challenge framed in terms amenable to the interests of the United States. Access to literacy and the panoply of opportunities that literacy supposedly

opened became synonymous with access to American promise and American progress.

This celebration of filmic literacy followed a consistent pattern, often recycling language across formats and purposes. Three elements of that pattern are particularly evocative for our purposes and will be easily recognized as familiar tropes by literacy scholars: 1) Discussions of the literacy project repeatedly presented illiterate adults as permanently childlike yet lacking the vigor of childhood, tapping into available assumptions about literacy and development. 2) The project made an essential link between matters of hygiene and the acquisition of literacy, binding them together as concomitant matters of modernity and American-ness. 3) Assessments of the program attributed near-miraculous effects to its use of motion pictures, imagining them as not only effective but life-changing—mimicking in a safer, more democratic and capitalistic way the effects of revolutionary fervor. Taken together, those three elements tightly linked acquisition of literacy to capacity for movement—in both a rhetorical and a circulatory sense. Through them, illiteracy stood stagnant and immobile, and the benefits of literacy accrued inevitably to those already understood as mobile. Whether withheld or extended, literacy served notions of economic development, consumption, and docility that privileged the interests of the US government, US companies (like Disney), and Latin American elites eager to align with them.

Childlike learners

In texts outlining the film program, adult Latin American literacy learners are frequently imagined as childlike, and film as uniquely capable of grasping and maintaining their attention. As one memo explained: "Adult illiterates, after a hard day's work, cannot be attracted, and their interest cannot be sustained, unless we offer entertainment as an inducement. This is proven beyond any doubt ... by the numerous attempts made in different countries to carry on literacy campaigns, which campaigns have failed invariably, because the ways and means through which they were carried on were tiresome and uninteresting to the adult illiterate" (Clark and de Lozada 2). Latin American literacy learners would not, in other words, pursue education for its own sake. Rather, they must be enticed and rewarded with pleasure, receiving literacy with sugar coating.

While that same memo's authors emphasize that their students will be adults, and so explicitly object to the use of teaching methods designed for children, the "Reading for the Americas" films were not precisely "adult" in style. Disney's animation gave even adult characters a childlike look, and the films' sing-song narration assumed an audience of ingénues. Even more tellingly, OIAA memos and public relations materials repeatedly depict adult literacy learners as lacking maturity: unable to help themselves, awed by the light and sound of film, easily swayed for good or ill, and limited to a basic level of learning. Following a pattern well established for treatment of Latin America's racial others, the Disney-OIAA literacy films approached their audience as adult children or, at least, as childlike adults (O'Connor). Acquisition of literacy wouldn't change that status.

The panel of literacy experts attending the May 1945 screening of the health and literacy films at the University of Chicago, for example, imagined literacy learners as recalcitrant children whose attention must be carefully attracted and monitored. These experts—education professors, a professor of Spanish, and a member of the board of directors for an educational film company—were

enthusiastic about film as a vital tool for motivating adult illiterates. A memo from Eleanor Clark summarizing the discussion lists the use of music and color to “increase the student’s enjoyment” as a particularly salient point of agreement among the experts. Remarking on the special problem of motivating Latin American literacy learners, Dr. Paul Witty, Professor of Education at Northwestern University and former director of the US Army Literacy Program, noted that “he was not faced with the same incentive problem with students in the Army as we are with our prospective students.” Military discipline, a classic marker of manhood, distinguished his students from the resistant, petulant Latin American. Film, however, would bring those childish students to attention, the Chicago experts agreed (E. Clark, “Literacy Film Showings” 3).

Latin American newspaper accounts of the pilot project likewise emphasized this image of the childlike illiterate entranced by the modern technology of film. Referring to the “pedagogical problem of holding the student’s interest,” one Ecuadorian newspaper article reported that “the attention of the adult student is completely monopolized by the pictures” while others used the language of hypnosis to describe how susceptible adult literacy learners were to the power of film (G. Vacas 3; “Important Motion Pictures”).

Beyond problems of motivation, discussions among OIAA staff and their US-based consultants also consistently highlighted the childlike limitations of their chosen students. The health films, for example, were designed “to arouse interest and awareness rather than teach detailed facts” on the assumption that their audience had neither the patience nor the intellectual capacity to retain complex or abstract information. Clem Thompson, an authority on adult illiterate education who attended the Chicago showing, emphasized the need to provide students with a limited kind of material. He recommended that motivation for learning be “very concrete and immediate to the life and livelihood of the student” (E. Clark, “Literacy Film Showings” 3). Thompson was not alone in that emphasis on the thoroughly concrete orientation of literacy learners. Other respondents similarly characterized illiterates as lacking the ability to think in abstractions. They recommended that “the vocabulary presented in the first films should consist principally of nouns, as they are easily picturable” (E. Clark, “Literacy Film Showings” 1). Two Chicago participants commented on the difficulty that abstract topics, such as “health,” would pose for adult literacy learners, recommending instead that films approach more practical topics, such as the cure of a specific disease (E. Clark, “Literacy Film Showings” 1, 3). Making a parallel assumption, articles describing the pilot project illustrate the response of literacy learners using examples that are striking in their childish simplicity—from an actual child who announces that spitting on the ground spreads tuberculosis to grown men who laugh with delight at recognizing a word or suddenly know to wash their hands (Madison, “Can Films” 4; Albornoz 28, 27).

Though the pedagogical point of these admonitions was to eschew the abstract in favor of the applicable, the frequency with which such commentary circulated makes clear that focus on the simplistic was not simply a matter of educational best practices. It also indexed the enclosed and stagnant world in which literate Americans believed their illiterate compatriots lived. Comments from one participant in an internal OIAA viewing of the films are indicative of a general presumption of Latin American limitation in comparison with US development. He noted that the one commonality

among their prospective students was the fact that they had "no foundation of scientific facts on which our modern medicine is based" and so could not progress far in their learning (Harrison 2).

Even when the illiterate subjects of the literacy pilot tests developed new skills through the program, their learning was still presented by experts and journalists in terms that reinforced a sense of dependence and limitation. The causes of such progress were rarely located in learner's own intellectual movement. An article published in *El Comercio*, one of Quito's leading newspapers, portrayed health and literacy instruction delivered through film as having a transformative effect because it essentially took over its subjects. The unhygienic bodies of illiterate Quiteños filling the room for the showings "emitt[ed] an acrid odor" that reeked of stagnation and lack of modern understanding. As those bodies were inhabited by the modern technology of film and the power of literacy, however, they were transformed: "they spoke the words in a firm and cheerful voice as if the first gleam of intelligent comprehension was shining from their dull eyes" (G. Vacas). It is hard to escape the impression that the light coming from the eyes of those odiferous literacy learners was emitted not by their own minds but by the film projector located in the back of the room.

And yet, in hortatory celebrations of the value of literacy, its *imagined* impact on students remained powerful. Madison, in his September 1944 report, claimed that "the audiences have not only thoroughly understood the material presented" but have also "been quick to adopt the new thoughts presented to them" ("Results" 1). Literacy, represented in the familiar terms of the literacy-orality divide, might just eventually move those childlike audiences from concrete to abstract thinking. That movement, in turn, offered the possibility of moving adult illiterates from childish dependency to adult citizenship. Another article in *El Comercio*, for example, explained that the Ministry of Education supported the program so that "it may continue to make progress in its work of teaching those Ecuadoreans who have not yet been able to take their places as well-prepared citizens" ("New Method"). Similarly, a letter celebrating the program that was sent to Nelson Rockefeller in 1944, describes the films as "a valuable addition to the protection of the health of the people who live in a primitive state as far as hygiene is concerned, in these countries of South America" (Vallejo Larrea and Arellano Montalvo).

Such dramatic movement was always placed just beyond the grasp of the actual students profiled in these reports, a common move in developmentalist literature of the time (A. Kim Clark, "Racial Ideologies"; Prieto). That did not deter the effusive celebration of literacy's potential within the Disney-OIAA project, however. Its task, after all, was less tied up in the specifics of reading and writing and far more concerned with the unification of a modern hemisphere. The shape of that larger orientation is particularly visible in the next element persistently present in discussions of the literacy project: the intimate connection between literacy and hygiene as synecdoches for modernity.

Hygiene & literacy

OIAA materials initiating the literacy project do not to offer an explicit justification for linking health and literacy. Instead, from the beginning of the project the two were assumed to be naturally intertwined. In fact, though disseminating literacy across the hemisphere was ostensibly the central objective of the project, OIAA officials imagined the health material as more essential than the films

explicitly teaching reading and writing. A letter sent to Dr. Rodriguez Bou in 1945, for example, reminds him that “the health films can be shown without the literacy films, but not the literacy films without the health films” (Black).

This emphasis on health information as a necessary vehicle for transmitting literacy education invokes, of course, the well-worn notion that reading and writing are not themselves content areas. It also, however, reveals the underlying assumptions about civilization and development that drove the OIAA's efforts in Latin America: both literacy and health serve primarily as indexes for modernity. “This modern means of teaching by movies” would directly transmit both health and literacy knowledge to illiterates, shaping them into modern subjects (Madison, “Can Films”). Lacking that, the a-modernity that suffused the illiterate, unhygienic majority of Latin Americans separated them from the assumed spheres of American-ness—democracy, consumption, and modern life itself—and made them a troublingly internal American other.⁸

From official reports to newspaper accounts of the Disney-OIAA project, the belief that literacy and hygiene were deeply imbricated in the broader experience of modernity was inescapable. Indeed a drive toward American advancement consistently took precedence over the specifics of literacy learning itself. A July 1945 report to the OIAA and the Inter-American Educational Foundation (IAEE) by the Conference on Community Education in Latin America with Special Reference to Literacy, for example, framed its work in terms of three overall objectives. The first two placed literacy within a frame unapologetically focused on American progress, as literacy training aimed “to raise the standard of living and to promote enlightened public opinion” and “to develop inter-American understanding” (“Report of the Committee”).⁹ Similarly, an article published in Guayaquil, Ecuador asserted that access to literacy would “kindle a light” in the mind of the illiterate person and so “[open] up a new horizon in his life, and as a final result, [add] a really useful member to the community as a whole” (“Campaign”). Individual literacy mattered, in this sense, to the extent that it moved a larger public body toward active citizenship and consumption.

A memo from OIAA staff coordinating the pilot project explains, for example, that the project they propose “is not to be a literacy program in a narrow sense, but in a broad sense. Learning to read and to write will be the basis of instruction, but the subject matter ... will enrich the adults' lives.” “Literacy in a broad sense” was, in other words, an ideological project. And so, literacy expanded to contain “instruction on health habits, agricultural techniques, crafts, and other subjects relating to the world in general, and the students' environments in particular” (Clark and de Lozada 1). Accessing literacy opened learners to an enriched life and incorporated them into a larger public body.

Ultimately, efforts to increase access to health and hygiene were not simply humanitarian activities. Rather, improved health and hygiene were fundamentally linked to democracy and prosperity. As one OIAA staff member explained in a memo about a parallel hygiene campaign in Ecuador: “A nation sick physically is sick economically, politically and socially” and so “is neither a good source of materials efficiently produced nor a good market for goods from other countries” and furthermore, “cannot be a democratic nation cannot hope for the political stability [sic] needed for optimum international relations” (F. Adams 1). In a similar, though more progressive tone, Dr.

Rodriguez Bou suggested to the UNP in Ecuador that while "all can learn," "we cannot expect all to learn with equal quickness and speed. People who are sick, ill-nourished individuals, alcoholics, those accustomed to receiving orders and to having others think for them, cannot react as promptly as those who eat properly, live well, and fully enjoy what the undernourished produce" ("Excerpts"). Illiteracy was an infection that putrefied modern life, a contagious form of public ill health. It infested the public body and prevented it from accessing social, political, and economic benefits. Persistent illiteracy and lack of hygiene enervated key American values such as democratic participation and capitalist consumption.

Latin American elites, aligning themselves with American modernity and education if not with the United States, used similar language to discuss the value of literacy and hygiene instruction. A letter to the OIAA from Ecuador's UNP asserted the efficacy of the Disney films for changing audience members' behavior, noting that "the day following the showing the students arrived clean and with quite a different appearance from that of the previous day" (Vallejo Larrea and Arellano Montalvo). Likewise, an article about the project by Miguel Albornoz, an Ecuadorian diplomat, suggested that literacy changed a smelly, dirty man into a model subject: "he very obviously had a bath. Moreover, his fingernails and hair had been trimmed [sic]. Rafael also wrote to the local paper, saying that at last he felt like a man, and he would urge all his friends to become literate" (27). These students, becoming clean and learning to read, remained subject to surveillance by outside elites who placed their own literacy and modernity always one step ahead of that attained by literacy learners. Illiterate Latin Americans were, in other words, caught in the same double bind that A. Kim Clark identifies trapping indigenous Ecuadorians in their political organizing and Catherine Prendergast illustrates with regard to African Americans and education in the United States: already identified with a category presumed deficient, they are unable to escape the mark of deficiency. The status travels with them no matter how much literacy they acquire (A. Kim Clark, "Race" 201; Prendergast 33).

Across internal memos and published reports, literacy and hygiene were fundamentally connected to modern life for the OIAA. And yet, literacy learning and hygiene education simultaneously calcified a category of Latin American others fundamentally separated from modernity. Always positioned as literacy learners, the majority of Latin Americans remained just outside the realm of equal participation. Institutional factors, political investments, and racist structures that blocked access to effective education and undermined anti-poverty efforts ensured that those other Americans stayed profoundly other. Their lack of movement toward healthful literacy reinvigorated US American and elite Latin American assumptions of distinction and reinforced the sense that those always literate elites held a higher claim to modernity, progress, national responsibility, and—in a word—Americanness.

The miraculous effects of film (and literacy)

While depictions of adult literacy learners emphasized their permanent childishness, their persistent failures of hygiene, and their inevitable lack of modernity, discussions of the Disney-OIAA literacy program celebrated its scientific maturity, its technological brightness, and its powerful

ability to transform its subjects. Literacy learners presented in reports and news articles were passive, immobile subjects energized by the activating force of motion picture literacy. If they were moved by their encounter with the films, it was motion picture technology that inspired them, not their own learning. The effects of motion picture literacy were sure, grounded in modern teaching methods and crafted by the leading experts in educational film. That scientific confidence that pervades accounts of the program was based, however, on an untested faith in the miracle of film and of American ingenuity. One Ecuadorian author, in his laudatory account of the pilot program, recognized as much, not only describing the literacy project as “a profoundly revolutionary experiment in pedagogical technique” but also emphasizing its use of “that magic realistic art ... that is, motion pictures” (G. Vacas).

OIAA records for the literacy program exude confidence about the ability of film to convey literacy and health information, but they are generally vague on specifics. Vacas may have been the only one to literally invoke the “magic” of film, but other accounts share his sense that there was something special but unknowable about the power of motion pictures. Anecdotal accounts of similar projects and their success sit alongside supportive commentary from US based experts in literacy, education, and film. The scholars and business consultants participating in the University of Chicago screening, for example, were in unanimous agreement about the films’ capacity to “play a valuable part in the stimulation of literacy among adults” (E. Clark, “Literacy Film Showings” 1). Likewise, the OIAA official who introduced the “Reading for the Americas” films at a screening for OIAA department and division heads expressed a vague hope for the potential of film to directly transmit literacy and health knowledge, noting that “direct learning through pictures might be possible” because “extensive tests in South America have shown that this is possible” (Harrison 2).

Accounts of the testing program emphasized two aspects of films’ power. First, and most consistently, they noted the motivational effects of motion pictures. Moving pictures moved illiterate adults to interest in learning and thus in modernity. As a report from the Conference on Community Education in Latin America with Special Reference to Literacy put it in July 1945, “the Literacy Program ought to seek to bring to bear upon the available resources of the community the content of modern science with a view towards integrating the rural folk of Latin America with the larger world” (“Report of the Committee” 2). Film, like literacy, motivated development.

Early discussions of motion picture literacy also, however, celebrated the potential for film to directly transmit literacy and health knowledge, suggesting that the films would have an almost instantaneous impact on the lives of their audiences. As an article published in Guayaquil, Ecuador explained it, teaching by film “instills the knowledge not only into the mind of the learner but into his consciousness as well” (“Important Motion Pictures”). The immediate efficacy of the films was similarly described in a report by Gustavo Vallejo Larrea, President of the UNP, who noted that “we can vouch for the results obtained with the teaching of hygiene,” because of the participants changed appearance the following day (Vallejo Larrea and Arellano Montalvo).

Perhaps because of that pervasive, near-magical faith in film, early reports from the pilot program emphasize affective response and anecdotal evidence. Although the project authorization characterized the testing program as “an opportunity to measure scientifically the teaching

effectiveness ... of the Disney health films," initial reports sent back to the OIAA emphasized audience reaction as a telling measure of efficacy. Madison reported that "everywhere they were shown, the films elicited the greatest interest and enthusiasms" ("Can Films" 3). Recounting the screening for Mexican army conscripts, Madison claimed that they were "elated over the showings" ("Can Films" 2). Clark, similarly, describes a Puerto Rican woman in New York who "chuckl[ed] with pleasure at her success" in reading aloud with the films (E. Clark, "Summary" 4). Madison presents as typical the example of an old man in El Salto, who requested the films be shown again because they have "shown me how easy it is to read" ("Can Films" 3). Albornoz similarly reports the gratitude of "one old peon" who "said sturdily that his employers could not fool him on the payroll any more" after he had seen the films a few times (28). Such reports assume that film and literacy, offered together, could effect change so wide-reaching that it needed no proof other than audience reaction. In fact, there were no plans to formally assess literacy learning for the proposed Brazilian portion of the testing program, as the experts asserted that "it will be possible to observe the reaction of illiterates to those teaching films on a purely subjective basis" ("Regarding" 1).

These overwhelmingly positive early reports reflect great confidence in the power of film and US ingenuity to fluidly and efficiently move Latin American audiences toward literacy, cleanliness, and modernity. They authorize and evince the pervading OIAA assumption that the United States was essential to the forward progress of Latin America. In this view, the United States alone had the technological capacities and economic wherewithal to project literacy into the lives of its southern neighbors. This inevitable success would come relatively easily, spurred forward by whole sentences, efficient methods, and the transformative light of the motion picture.

ENDINGS AND CONTINUITIES

Those visions of motion picture miracles came to a rather abrupt end. When the results of the test project were finally calculated several months after Madison's confident reports, they were not encouraging. Although scores in both test groups increased "significantly" on health and reading, direct instruction by teachers was markedly more effective than the films were. Students taught by a teacher scored higher in all areas, and the testers concluded that "a teacher is probably better than films alone" (Holland 1). However, despite these rather discouraging results, and against all evidence to the contrary, the report insisted that "we are very sure that films are a useful teaching instrument" (Holland 1). Faith in the power of film was resilient.

Still, a December 19, 1945 meeting of the Board of Directors for the OIAA-affiliated Inter-American Educational Foundation (IAEF) effectively spelled the end of the film program. The Board expressed concerns about the expense of the project and concluded that "there are not, therefore, sufficient funds available to carry out the project, even had the results of the testing been favorable to film" (Holland 1). The revised approach to literacy they advocated emphasized cooperation with the successful literacy campaigns already underway in Latin America. Although these new efforts would be made in cooperation with local authorities, the United States would retain a central role in creating and distributing instructional materials, including printed materials, film strips, and (once

again) motion pictures, reinforcing its identity as the central location from which literacy should be disseminated.

Even in light of the disappointing test results, IAEF discussions still characterized film instruction as valuable for its ability to engage students, and the December 19 report described the motion picture as “a useful and attractive medium for creating popular interest in, and information about, an educational problem like that of literacy” (Holland 4). What persisted beyond the film literacy program, in other words, was a vision of American elites—US experts and Latin American program coordinators—united by their informed action against the pervasive stagnation of illiteracy and poor hygiene. Film, it seemed, just ought to be powerful enough to move those stubbornly un-modern masses forward.

Latin American coverage of the Disney-OIAA program likewise emphasized inter-hemispheric cooperation for progress as the ultimate effect of literacy training. One article remarks on Dr. Rodríguez Bou’s ambition to “see a united America in which democracy will no longer be the privilege of only a few individuals.” It notes as well Rodríguez Bou’s desire “to leave bonds of real solidarity among our educated classes who likewise think and dream as he does of a better, more united and prosperous America” (“Effective”). Similarly, a report from Honduras specifically invokes American foreign policy to characterize the benefits of the film literacy program, noting that “we have been receiving in full measure benefits of the Good Neighbor Policy, translated into important material and cultural accomplishments.” These articles, alongside letters written by government officials and Army leadership, were collected and archived at the OIAA. As Latin American elites allied themselves with the rhetorical aims of the program, their voices became part of the official record celebrating the modern impulse of motion pictures.

However, this cooperation came at a cost. The conversations generated by the Disney-OIAA literacy program reinscribed the otherness of those Latin Americans not already possessing literacy. Without literacy, they lacked access to literate movement and literate affiliation; the hemisphere connected by filmic literacy simultaneously wrote literacy learners out. As one newspaper article from Ecuador tellingly suggested, those without literacy lived within America yet separate from it: literacy training “[helped] the people of Ecuador escape from the disgrace ... of having two million illiterate inhabitants” (“New Method”). The language of the article begs two questions: who are those two million inhabitants if not Ecuadorian people? and What does it mean for a people to be inhabited by illiterates? Seemingly, the more attention paid to illiteracy, the more experts who circulated intent on studying it, the more technology developed for eradicating it, the more fully were Latin American “adult illiterates” separated from the image of America. While the literate, modern hemisphere moved forward, those without literacy remained stuck behind. Like the audience in rural Ecuador described by Albornoz, they were transfixed by moving pictures, tantalizingly close to the health and modernity promised to those who gained “the advantages of knowing how to read and write,” but never quite able to claim those advantages for their own.

NOTES

¹ The feature films Disney produced in its collaboration with the OIAA—most notably *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*—highlight easy movement from the United States to Latin America and celebrate warm American connections. See, for example, the hop-skip-jump depictions of plane travel from the United States to Brazil and the immediate connection between José Carioca and Donald Duck in *Saludos Amigos*. It's worth noting as well that travel among the other American republics is shown as more risky—the sketch about Pedro the airplane's trip across the Andes in *Saludos Amigos* is laden with myth (the personified threat of the mountain Aconcagua) and difficulty (the height and fridity of the Andes). See Dale Adams, "Saludos Amigos," for more on Hollywood and FDR's Good Neighbor policy.

² The Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs took over the work of its predecessor agency, the Office for Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations Between the American Republics, which was established in August 1940 by the Council of National Defense. In 1945, the agency's name was changed once more, to the Office of Inter-American Affairs. The records of the agency held at the National Archives are under that final title, and for consistency's sake, we also use that acronym to refer to the agency throughout its existence.

³ The Coordinator position was almost certainly designed for Rockefeller. The name of the agency was changed to omit the "Coordinator" just before Rockefeller left the office, and the executive order creating the OIAA specifically states that "[t]he Coordinator shall serve as such without compensation but shall be entitled to ... expenses incidental to the performance of his duties" (Roosevelt "Executive"). Surely only someone with the independent wealth of a Rockefeller could have undertaken such arduous public service without remuneration.

⁴ From the perspective of our interest in assumptions of US modernity, there is something telling about de Lozada's choice to describe Latin Americans as "illiteracy experts" and US Americans as "outstanding teachers and technicians."

⁵ Cutting's memo to Walt Disney, though stapled into a single document, contains three separately paginated sections—an overview of concerns related to the literacy program, a "Memo on Personnel," and a "Diary." When referring to the document, we will give pages as "Memo-#," "Personnel-#," or "Diary-#" for maximum clarity.

⁶ At least one Latin American educator left the project in light of this choice, feeling that her expertise had been ignored. She later publicly criticized the pilot project during its time in Mexico (de Lozada).

⁷ As forthcoming work by Kelly Ritter suggests, this sense of film's ability to control the space of the classroom and promote not only literacy but also uniform American values was not limited to films with an international mission. Educational films made for US classrooms evince similar assumptions and serve similar ends (Ritter).

⁸ For more on this question of the nation and its internal others, see chapter four in C. Olson, *Constitutive Visions*.

⁹ The Inter-American Educational Foundation was one of five subsidiary corporations spun off from the OIAA to [facilitate] the undertaking of larger-scale operations that required close cooperation with Latin American authorities and were financed through bilateral funds or dependent on longer-term budgetary commitments" (Cramer and Prutsch 788).

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