Symbols of Commerce

Exploring the Place of the United States in the Late Nineteenth-Century
Venezuelan Consumer Imaginary

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On a sultry afternoon in late 1899, Doña María, a hypothetical member of the consuming public in Caracas, visited her local *bodega* in Chacao for a package of “Harinolina” cooking oil, one dozen “*Velas Estéricas*” candles, a bottle of “*Alizo*” champagne, a box of “*El Águila*” matches, a package of “*Flor Patria*” cigarettes, and a package of lace ribbon. Let us imagine that at a store in the nearby neighborhood of Los Dos Caminos, Doña Dilia, another representative housewife, purchased a bar of “*Dos Flechas*” soap, a bar of “*El Indio*” Colombian chocolate, and two bottles of the latest curative *jarabes*, or liquid medicines, “*Quita Dolor Javillano*” and “*Jarabe de Tabonuco al Guayacol.*” Upon their return home, both women might have encountered their husbands reading the advertising section of *El Cojo Ilustrado*, the local newspaper, gazing at the latest North American technological marvels that had just become available in Caracas.

Why imagine this seemingly unremarkable scenario? The answer is surprising. Every single item that Doña María brought from the *bodega* featured a proud, defiant, open-beaked, majestic-winged bird of prey on the packaging, and not just any one: the unmistakable North American Bald Eagle. In the case of the fabric packaging, the eagle appeared surrounded with a circle of stars, while in the cigarette and cooking oil packaging, the eagle clutched a ribbon with the statements “*Non omnia possumus omnes*” and “*No hay más allá,*” respectively.

Doña Dilia’s purchases, on the other hand, featured images of distinctively North American “Indians.” The chocolate bar featured a side portrait of an Indian chief, complete with head adornments with feathers. The “*Quita Dolor Javillano*” featured an Indian warrior in a defensive position, clutching a spear, while the “*Jarabe de Tabonuco al Guayacol*” portrayed an Indian in a feathered headdress sitting atop a rock with a Davy-Crockett style musket at his side. Finally, the box of matches showed an Indian wearing a loincloth, aiming a taut bow and arrow.
This artwork contains unmistakable symbolic references to the United States. Even today, the Bald Eagle and the Native American Indian remain two of the most recognizable images associated with U.S. ideology, nationalism, and history. The eagle represents liberty, freedom, strength, and determination. The venerable tribal hero-warrior embodies honor, courage, nobility, and dignity. While the two matriarchs are products of our imagination, the product references are quite real. They raise a quintessential question: why would anyone in Venezuela appropriate these images? It seems clear that Venezuelan manufacturers believed that symbols of the United States enhanced the appeal of their products. Such appeal would require popular familiarity with the images. Therefore, the appearance of the Bald Eagle and the Native American Indian on Venezuelan product packaging suggests a fairly close relationship between the United States and Venezuela.

Today, this point seems unquestionable: the Venezuelan marketplace models U.S. consumer culture. Shopping malls similar to those throughout the United States dot the landscape of cosmopolitan Caracas. Judith Ewell argues that Venezuela is the most “Americanized” of any nation in Latin America: “Venezuelans watch Dallas on television as avidly as Cristal; vacation in Miami as well as in Margarita; drink guiski [whisky] with Coca Cola; . . . dance equally to the beat of Oscar D’León and Michael Jackson.”² The emergence of Venezuela as a “petroleum empire,” in the words of Ewell, has solidified Venezuela’s position as the nation in the hemisphere most inevitably and inextricably wedded to the United States, despite the often-turbulent “love-hate” relationship in the political realm.³ But what common roots exist in the stories of the United States and Venezuela? In the nineteenth century, when it was developing as a nation, how did Venezuela engage with its powerful neighbor to the north? At the level of quotidian life, what type and extent of power did the United States have in the
representative world, the cultural imaginary, of the Venezuelan populace?

The existing scholarship offers two perspectives on the relationship between the United States and Venezuela during the nineteenth century. A number of scholars describe the relationship as one that originated ostensibly in trade, yet had underlying romanticized notions of destiny. Janet Kelly and Carlos Romero argue that Venezuela’s early independence story followed from the success of ideologies of liberty in North America. They point to George Washington and Simón Bolívar as analogous liberators, heroes of independence “link[ing] the historical traditions of both countries.” They point to a close relationship between the United States and Venezuela in the nineteenth century that resulted from “their common birthright as countries born of the first wars for independence in the Western Hemisphere[,] . . . we can say that the United States and Venezuela are linked in parallel lives as the ‘new nations’ that . . . set out on a common adventure.” Kelly and Romero synthesize the notion by arguing that the United States and Venezuela had a shared destiny as both sought to liberate themselves from European imperialist control. This collective ideology, while common to most of independent Latin America during the nineteenth century, held particular resonance in Venezuela.

Judith Ewell points to this romanticized, idealized relationship in her discussion of the “cult of Bolívar,” whom she associates with George Washington. She notes that during the reign of “strong-man” dictator Antonio Guzmán Blanco in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Venezuelans idolized Bolívar and equated him with the values of liberty and republicanism of the U.S. Revolutionary War: “The newly sanctified Bolívar . . . represented national unity, American republicanism, and glorification of the educated and racially pure elite hero.” Indeed, Ewell explains, Guzmán Blanco sought to establish a tangible connection in the Venezuelan imaginary between the two republics: “Guzmán Blanco also embraced the symbolic heroism of
George Washington, encouraging the popular view of the historical parallels between the two American liberators.” Guzmán even dedicated a Caracas plaza to Bolívar’s North American counterpart, complete with a statue. Primary evidence from outside the governmental realm shows consistency with Ewell’s work. In the early twentieth century, British traveler William Corlett visited Caracas and, noting the prominence of the “Plaza Washington,” he contemplated the underlying connotations about U.S.-Venezuelan relations: “The Republic of Venezuela has copied largely from her elder sister, the United States of North America.”

In theory, this discourse of a romanticized relationship, if it existed in a broad sector of the population, could help to explain why symbols of North America were so pervasive in Venezuelan culture by the late nineteenth century. Elsewhere in the world, idealized symbols of independence and freedom enjoyed substantial popularity. For example, Karl May, a popular German novelist of the era, used the Native American Indian in his work. He created a fictional Apache chief, Winnetou, and wrote a series of novels discussing his adventures and exploits in the Wild West. Through his work, May contributed an image of North America to the cultural imaginary of the German population: the dignified “Indian” meeting the challenge of Manifest Destiny with honor and courage. The covers of the novels feature color illustrations of this chief in caricaturized, stereotypical postures of power and dignity very similar to those appearing on the Venezuelan products. May constructs Winnetou as the archetypal Native American warrior.

However, this stereotyped, romanticized vision of an irrevocable connection of destiny between the United States and Venezuela that Kelly and Romero offer, and of which Karl May’s work serves as an example, cannot explain why visual imagery associated with North America became so ingrained in the cultural universe of Venezuela’s ordinary people. The rhetorical lens
forces the scholar into the realm of metaphor and representation, even when discussing major political events and economic trends. It offers no major assistance in understanding the quotidian experience among the consuming populace in Caracas. Scholars have yet to uncover evidence on the extent to which these references circulated in the country.

A second major current of scholarship describes the nineteenth-century relationship between Venezuela and the United States from a diplomatic angle, highlighting major political events and interactions rather than quotidian life and commercial relations. In a 1964 dissertation, Benjamin Frankel argues that the intervention of North America in Venezuelan affairs did not result exclusively from the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary, but instead from Venezuela’s continual requests for intervention. Furthermore, he claims that the nineteenth century experience fostered a negative image of the United States in Venezuela, a “rejection of United States cultural values . . . because . . . [they] are unique and therefore alien to the rest of the hemisphere.” According to Frankel, the United States had trouble convincing Latin American nations of its benevolence because the “hemisphere . . . continue[d] to insist that the Yankee is soulless, materialist, and completely lacking in an ideology.”

It seems apparent that Frankel’s study emerged from a decidedly tense and polarized moment in U.S.-Latin American relations at the height of the Cold War. The study has so overpowering an ideological bent that it offers little insight into the quotidian, commercial relationship between the two countries by the end of the nineteenth century.

Other scholars employ a similar focus on diplomatic and political issues. Sheldon Liss offers an explicit argument about focusing on U.S.-Venezuelan relations through a diplomatic lens. He focuses on the dissolution of Bolívar’s Gran Colombia, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States, and the U.S. intervention in the Venezuelan dispute with Great
Britain over the eastern boundary with British Guyana. Vilma Petrásh analogizes the relationship between the United States and Venezuela to that between the United States and Canada. She argues that few countries in Latin America have sustained so close a relationship with North America, “not only at the level of state to state—in diplomacy and politics, economics, and culture—but also in non-govermentals areas.” Nevertheless, she structures the substance of her narrative around describing major treaties and military offensives, including the War of 1812 against the British and the U.S.-Spanish negotiations over the relinquishing of Florida to North American control. She emphasizes events involving major politicians such as Bolívar, Francisco Miranda, and José Antonio Páez, another of Venezuela’s independence heroes. When trade enters her analysis of U.S.-Venezuelan relations, it does so in the realm of international politics, such as her discussion of political turbulence associated with U.S. consular claims of discriminatory treatment of North American cargo vessels in comparison to that of British vessels.

Judith Ewell’s discussion of the nineteenth century offers generous discussion of the development of political and diplomatic relations as well, though she puts a colorful twist on it. She invokes traditional Venezuelan folklore to describe the U.S.-Venezuelan relationship as a metaphorical connection between the clever rabbit, “Tío Conejo,” and the ferocious tiger, “Tío Tigre.” She characterizes the political relationship between the two countries as one in which the rabbit has tried to escape from the metaphorical claws of the tiger, without success: “Of course, el conejo could never definitively defeat el tigre, or alter the skewed power relationship between them. But his cleverness could ensure survival and a degree of independence beyond the reach of the tiger’s powerful claws.” While Ewell’s intervention takes a unique form by acknowledging the folkloric, proverbial side of international relations, it remains wedded to the
political realm.

In short, these scholars describe the Venezuelan-U.S. relationship through a lens of international politics and diplomacy, focusing on major events and leaders’ actions. They do not discuss the place of the United States in the imaginary of the Venezuelan mainstream population in the course of everyday life. Looking at the existing body of scholarship, one notes a methodological problem: treaties and political memoranda inform very little about the lived experience on the ground in Venezuela, and they tell even less about the mindset of individuals, such as the fictional Doña María and Doña Dilia, who confronted symbols of the United States around the beginning of the twentieth century.

The shortcomings in the current historiography in the realm of Venezuelan quotidian life offer a point of departure for this research. How, and to what extent, did representations of the United States enter the representative world of the Venezuelan populace? By moving away from describing the Venezuelan-United States connection through a political, diplomatic lens, and concentrating instead on evidence of an unofficial relationship, one can draw more specific conclusions about the coming together of the two countries. This paper utilizes a variety of forms of evidence, many from Venezuela, to examine the relationship in trade and everyday life. It seeks to illustrate the place of the United States in Venezuela as the ordinary population would have experienced it. The documentation suggests that the most powerful and enduring angle of relations between Venezuela and the United States during the nineteenth century was not in the realm of diplomacy and high politics, as some scholars imply. Instead, trade, especially the importation of products and symbols, shaped Venezuelan attitudes toward the United States and fostered the inextricable link that has become so powerful in the past century. Three lines of reasoning support this claim.
First, the official discourse between Venezuela and the United States was quite limited in scope and extent until the 1890s. A survey of the Congressional Record and its antecedents suggests that the only, and minimal, interest of the U.S. government in Venezuela, until the Guyana boundary dispute, centered on humanitarian aid, repayment of debts, and maritime claims. Furthermore, Latin American intellectuals, including Rubén Darío, Rufino Blanco Fombona, José María Vargas Vila, and César Zumeta, condemned, rather than praised, the influence of the United States—commercial, political, and otherwise—in Venezuela and other countries in the region. The evidence from these official and intellectual circles cannot explain the symbolic connections between the two countries that existed in the quotidian world.

Second, the substantial trade network between the two countries gave Venezuelans a window into U.S. materiality. Statistical evidence from Venezuela indicates that the level of importation of U.S. commodities far exceeded the potential demands of the miniscule population of expatriates. The data suggest that these goods entered the marketplace for ordinary members of society. On the export side, the United States was the most important market for Venezuelan raw materials. In addition, newspaper advertisements, such as the ones in El Cojo Ilustrado that appears in the fictional opening vignette, suggest that the literate classes received constant reminders of innovative imported U.S. products.

Third, Venezuelans exhibited a fascination for North American developments—cultural, political, technological, scientific, and otherwise. A collection of articles in El Cojo Ilustrado describing localized and technological news from the United States suggests that ordinary Venezuelans grasped with enthusiasm for information about events taking place in the paradise of modernity to the north.

In sum, the evidence shows that one must look beyond official discourse and intellectual
currents to understand how Venezuela and the United States came to enjoy the powerful commercial ties that the use of the Bald Eagle and the Native American Indian represent. This paper argues that trade allowed Venezuela to develop a powerful and enduring cultural discourse with the United States, independent of sporadic official contact and cynical intellectual currents, because high levels of transoceanic commerce brought North American products into the mainstream Venezuelan marketplace.

**Exploring Discourse in Official and Intellectual Circles**

Much of the existing scholarship could lead one to conclude that Venezuela and the United States enjoyed substantive and regular diplomatic and political relations during the nineteenth century. Benjamin Frankel, Sheldon Liss, and Vilma Petrásh all point to the political realm as the one in which the two countries engaged with greatest regularity after independence. Furthermore, the work of Judith Ewell, Janet Kelly, and Carlos Romero implies that, in order for such a link based on mutual ideologies and sentiments of destiny to exist, diplomatic relations must have propagated and bolstered international cooperation between the two countries. Thus, one might expect to find substantial official discourse between Venezuelan and U.S. policymakers, building gradually over the course of the nineteenth century.

However, two collections of evidence suggest that that this assumption is far from the truth. A survey of the United States *Congressional Record* and its antecedent publications suggests that for much of the century, policymakers engaged in very little official discourse on Venezuela on the floors of the House and Senate. When Venezuela did receive attention, congressmen focused on the issue of maritime claims against its government, seeking “award” payment for damages that U.S. vessels suffered, for their detention at the major Venezuelan port.
of La Guaira and elsewhere, and for the preference that the Venezuelan government ostensibly
gave to British commercial vessels over North American ones. The policymakers offered no
indications that Venezuela held any significance for their purposes except as a debtor. The series
of brief discussions on Venezuela did not enter the realm of trade in any substantive way.
Furthermore, the writings of Latin Americans suggest that the intelligentsia throughout the
region showed strong opposition toward, not support of, the notion of solidarity between
Venezuela and the United States. They believed the United States was exploiting the Monroe
Doctrine of 1823 to replace Europe as the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere. Therefore,
official and intellectual exchanges were very limited and cannot explain how North American
symbols enjoyed such visibility and acceptance among the Venezuelan populace.

Reparations from maritime claims against the South American country dominated
rhetoric on Venezuela in the U.S. Congress until the 1890s. In particular, proceedings and
debates from the 1870s and 1880s focused on obtaining the “awards” that Venezuela owed the
United States. On Tuesday, December 7, 1875, in his annual message to Congress, President
Ulysses S. Grant declared that after much prodding, Venezuela had “practically abandoned its
objection to pay” the awards to U.S. traders who brought the claims against the government for
lost revenue and damages. He cautioned, however, that “its payments on account of claims of
citizens of the United States are still so meager in amount” that Venezuela seemed to be
disregarding its repayment obligations under treaties that the two countries had signed agreeing
to the payment amounts and frequencies.¹⁴

The U.S. government felt sufficient concern over this lack of payment that on April 25,
1866, it established a special joint convention with Venezuela to investigate the maritime claims
that U.S. citizens and interests made against the South American country. The convention
between the two countries emerged in print as a presidential proclamation the following year. The document explains the exact procedures by which commissioners from both countries would meet to discuss claims and order payments. The commission also served as an independent entity to which United States citizens could submit their claims for arbitration by a joint panel, instead of submitting them to the Venezuelan government directly. The purpose of the commission was to ensure that Venezuela paid its claims so that relations between the two countries would remain cordial and productive.

Much of the discourse in Congress following this bilateral agreement, and the commission it created, concerned its enforcement and implications. Most of the references are extremely brief and contain only the title or a sentence concerning the commission. It is likely that these references involved no open discussion on the House floor, but rather were part of the endless shuffle of paperwork in Congress—receipts of payments and interest due on the U.S. claims from Venezuela, requests for information from the President or Secretary of State on accumulated revenues, and similar documents. In one discussion, members of Congress debated a request for the clerk to read a certain joint Congressional resolution concerning repayment from Venezuela aloud for the record, followed by a much more extensive report to the Committee on Foreign Affairs regarding the specifics of the claims issue in Venezuela.

The assembled representatives engaged in a lively debate over a Venezuelan contention that the commission was not a legitimate bilateral entity, but instead was under U.S. control that inflated the amounts of Venezuela’s debts. One Congressman interpreted the situation in a very different way: “Venezuela is now a suitor against the United States and demands that the United States relinquish the claims which the arbitration has solemnly adjudicated in our favor.” Another held a more tempered position: “The truth is that Venezuela has never refused to pay
any portion of the claims . . . she has expressed her anxiety to pay them all just as fast as she had any money to do so.” In the end, the Congressmen concurred that Venezuela had paid only 15% of the $459,000 that it owed in U.S. claims by August 11, 1876.18

It is not surprising that Congress held concerns about the Venezuelan claims and the resulting revenue that it owed the U.S. Treasury. The United States was at a crucial stage in national recovery following the Civil War and sought to showcase its resolve on the international stage while engaging in the domestic economic recovery that it needed in order to move forward. The debate among Congressmen about whether to offer lenience toward Venezuela seems more a reflection on the attitude they took toward foreign relations in general, in an effort to show the strength of a fractured but healing nation. Indeed, none of the rhetoric acknowledges anything specific or unique to the South American country. Venezuela seems to have existed as merely a debtor for the Congressmen who discussed it. The relative paucity of occasions when the topic of Venezuela entered Congressional rhetoric, and the generalized nature of it, suggests that Venezuela itself was not a major interest or concern to the United States government for much of the nineteenth century.

The intellectual currents within Latin America during the late eighteenth century offer another possible interpretation of the role of the United States in Venezuela. Given that contemporary scholars have “almost completely ignored Latin American views of the United States,” as Jack Ray Thomas argues, one cannot expect a broad historiography to establish precise schools of thought among Latin American writers from the late nineteenth century.19 However, Maurice Belrose offers a helpful compendium of the dominant perspectives among intellectuals in the region on the growing influence of “Uncle Sam” throughout Latin America.20 According to Belrose, Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío led a cadre of thinkers who viewed the
North American commercial and political incursions into Latin America with great concern. These intellectuals published their writings in *El Cojo Ilustrado* for public consumption in Caracas. In October of 1898, Darío analogized the U.S.-Latin American relationship to that between the characters of Caliban and Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. He argued that the United States represented Caliban, a savage, cannibalistic menace that threatened Latin American progress and solidarity: “The image of Caliban is a caricature designed to inspire repulsion and fear. The North Americans . . . were ‘eaters of raw meat,’ ‘bestial blacksmiths,’ . . . ‘enemies of all identity.’” Darío held that the United States had allied with England to reinforce and perpetuate the “Anglo-Saxon race” and utilized the Monroe Doctrine to establish mercantilist relationships with Latin American countries. Venezuela, in particular, appears in Darío’s prose: “The case of Venezuela reveals that when economic interests of a colonial and imperialist type are in play, the pertinence of the ‘Latin race’ . . . is insufficient to impede an alliance of Hispanic, Anglo-Saxon, and Germanic countries against a single unified Latin American nation.” Darío likely was pointing to the political ramifications of the remarkable level of importation of U.S. commodities into Venezuela, as the data in the next section illustrate. The commercial relationship, he contended, reinforced a neocolonial relationship while hindering the development of solidarity between Venezuela and its sister nations in the region.

This current among intellectuals of Latin American solidarity against a “bestial,” imperialist United States continued during the transition into the twentieth century. Venezuelan intellectual Rufino Blanco Fombona denounced U.S. global dominance and the “‘practical [pragmatic] spirit’ of the Anglo-Saxon civilization” in 1899. Blanco Fombona saw the United States as acting in opposition to the idealistic, patriotic spirit in Latin America that had begun
with leaders such as Bolivar and continued to dominate intellectual rhetoric. Soon after, the French magazine *Renaissance Latine* conducted a survey of five Latin American intellectuals, Marcos Aurelio Soto from Honduras, José María Vargas Vila from Colombia, Blanco Fombona and César Zumeta from Venezuela, and Darío from Nicaragua, to determine the intellectual position within the region on the future of the Latin American republics, the influence of the United States in the region, and the concept of “Pan-Americanism.” Their responses suggest a clear focus on Europe in intellectual circles, using idealistic neocolonial sentiments as a means of resisting North American expansionism. The intellectuals strongly opposed invocations of the Monroe Doctrine by the United States to promulgate its influence in the region.

Soto concurred with Darío’s “Caliban” analogy, arguing that the United States was an “imperialist and aggressive nation desiring to impose the domination of the ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ on Latin America.” He also saw the Anglo-Saxon race as lacking in the “sentimentalism and idealism” present in the Hispanic-American race. Vargas Vila called for large-scale resistance to the “silent invasion of the United States,” in the curious form of “large rival confederations” in South America that would fight each other, one integrating Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, and another encompassing Argentina and Chile. He opposed the notion of “Pan-Americanism” because he thought that genuine Latin American culture “had no North American cultural and intellectual influence” and instead was “essentially French, and hostile toward the Anglo-Saxon spirit.” Blanco Fombona held similarly critical sentiments regarding Pan-Americanism, considering it “an instrument in the hands of the United States.” He opposed “panlatinismo,” a term referring to Latin American, as opposed to full hemispheric, solidarity. However, he preferred to visualize a grand South America such as Bolivar’s failed experiment of “Gran Colombia,” instead of warring rival supranational factions.
Darío condemned the notion of “Pan-Americanism” as well, considering it, in the words of Belrose, “an invention of the United States to inundate the markets of the ‘new continent’ with its products.” He believed that South America should form a “vast empire that might be the ‘savior of the Latino spirit.’” In his pessimistic view, César Zumeta labeled the entire continent “infirm” and claimed that “two Latin Americas” existed: the “extra-tropical” countries, Chile and Argentina, that were “out of danger” of U.S. expansionism, and the “intertropical” countries bordering the Caribbean that were “in immediate danger of absorption by the United States.” Zumeta deemed Pan-Americanism an “‘economic and political impossibility’” and an “‘application of imperialism’” that jeopardized Latin American solidarity.

Thus, while these intellectuals might have disagreed on the specifics of creating Latin American solidarity and unity, all resisted U.S. expansionist efforts. They saw the notion of “Pan-Americanism” as nothing more than the Monroe Doctrine in disguise, and called instead for unity in Latin America. It is important to acknowledge that not all Latin American intellectuals opposed North American intervention. According to Belrose, two Venezuelans, Juan Liscano and Andrés Vigas, published articles defending the Monroe Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary as the only way to allow Latin America finally to complete its dissociation from Europe. Belrose explains that this pro-U.S. intellectual discourse arose from those who saw Latin America’s development as emerging only through a merging with North American interests. Imitation of the United States, and close ties to its commercial universe, offered the only model for emerging from underdevelopment and “barbarism.”

As this section shows, neither the official discourse in the U.S. Congress on Venezuela nor the writing of Latin American intellectuals offers an explanation for the ostensibly close relationship that the product packaging implies in its incorporation of the Native American
Indian and the Bald Eagle. Until the end of the century, policymakers in the U.S. Congress treated Venezuela as nothing more than an occasional annoyance. Furthermore, most Latin American intellectuals at the time viewed the United States with suspicion and called for an ideological and political distancing, not a romanticized commercial unification, of the region from the grasp of Uncle Sam. The data on importation in the next section show why distance might have been necessary. Venezuelans consumed more, not less, merchandise from the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. Even within the pages of El Cojo Ilustrado, a taste for imported products overpowered impassioned anti-imperialist rhetoric.

**Importation and Advertising in Caracas**

The economic relationship between the United States and Venezuela has strong documentation. Vilma Petrásh argues that the initial contact between the countries during the eighteenth century was commercial, in which the United States acted as the supplier for Venezuela of products of all origins, including European and even African. These products included machinery, tools, wheat flour, and slaves. Petrásh notes that this early trade relationship drove the establishment of one of the earliest U.S. consulates in South America in La Guaira, Venezuela, in 1800. The collapse of Spanish colonial power in the Americas precipitated further growth of U.S.-Venezuelan trade.  

In her limited discussion of imported commodities, Judith Ewell explains that the commercial connections between the United States and Venezuela became even more solidified after independence. Steam power made Venezuela a central market for U.S. commodities by mid-century. Venezuela enjoyed a privileged position among the Latin American countries in its foreign trade with the United States. Its Caribbean ports were the only ones in South America to
receive direct steamship service from the north, through the Red D Line, a partnership of a Philadelphia shipping company and the John Boulton Company, a British shipping operation in Venezuela. Indeed, as Figure 15 illustrates, during 1882-1883, 240 ships of U.S. registry entered and departed from Venezuela, more than any other overseas power. In 1894, only the Netherlands slightly surpassed the United States as the dominant foreign commercial presence in Venezuela, no doubt because of Dutch bases in nearby Aruba and Curaçao.31

Ewell also points to international expositions as central to the commercial relationship between Venezuela and the United States. Venezuela exhibited its products at North American expositions, while the United States sent delegations and products to Venezuela in 1883. By the end of the century, a permanent exposition of U.S. manufactured goods existed in Caracas, representing the National Association of Manufacturers.32 However, Ewell focuses on the negotiations of trading rather than on the quotidian effects of international commerce.

The relative lack of scholarly interest in the role of symbols in the U.S.-Venezuelan commercial relationship during the nineteenth century is not surprising. One might think that the images of the Bald Eagle and the Native American Indian present on packaging in Venezuela were not intended to appeal to Venezuelans. For instance, one could hypothesize that a significant number of U.S. citizens might have resided in Venezuela, and that the use of these representative symbols appealed to the materialistic sensibilities of expatriates living in Caracas, perhaps offering them a “taste of home.”

However, this presumption is incorrect for a number of reasons. By examining Venezuelan statistical data from the later part of the nineteenth century, one notes a considerable discontinuity between the levels of importation from the United States into Venezuela and the numbers of expatriate North Americans residing there. As Figure 16 illustrates, during 1886-1887, the United States was the largest source of imported commodities into Venezuela, with total imports valued at over 24.8 million bolívares, with Great Britain second at over 17.7 million bolívares. Importation from the United States continued to dominate all countries other than Britain during 1887-1888, when over 19.7 million bolívares worth of merchandise entered Venezuela from the United States, along with imports valued at 23.5 million bolívares from Great Britain. These data suggest that the United States was a massive and dynamic commercial presence in Venezuela by the late nineteenth century, sometimes rivaling Great Britain with its expanding commercial sea power.

In addition to importation statistics, population statistics offer an understanding of Venezuela’s commercial culture and base of purchasers that could have made symbols of the United States desirable. As Figure 17 shows, an astonishingly small number of North Americans resided in Venezuela, according to the local government census of 1881. Compared to tens of
thousands of Spaniards and almost as many people from Colombia, as well as thousands of French, Italians, Britons, Germans, and Dutch, only 179 North Americans took up residence in Venezuela. British traveler William Corlett noted in his travel account a paucity of foreign tourists in Caracas, and its effect on the types of industries that might cater to them: “Naturally a few Panama hats and some old pieces of jewelry were picked up, but so few tourists invade this mountain stronghold of discomfort that the merchant was scarcely alive to the lucrative possibilities of tourist traffic.”

Ewell notes that in exchange for manufactured products, wheat flour, lard, rice, and corn from the United States, Venezuela exported coffee, cacao, indigo, and rawhides. Figure 18 shows that the United States was second only to Germany in values of exported materials from Venezuela in 1875-1876. By 1888, the United States enjoyed values of exports more than three times those of other overseas powers, including France, Great Britain, and Spain. Figure 19 shows that coffee was Venezuela’s most lucrative export by far, earning Venezuela between $70 and $90 million Bolivares per annum during 1888-1894. Cacao, hides, and precious metals held importance in the export market as well. Figure 20 illustrates that the United States was the primary destination for exports of coffee and hides, while France imported the most Venezuelan cacao, during 1886-1888.
FIGURE 16
Importation into Venezuela by Country in Bolívares

Source: Anuario Estadístico de los Estados Unidos de Venezuela, 1891 (Caracas, Venezuela: Imprenta y Litografía del Gobierno Nacional, 1891), 187.

FIGURE 17
Foreigners Resident in Venezuela based on the Census of 1881

Source: Segundo censo de la república: Decreto del ilustre americano General Guzmán Blanco, Presidente de la República (Caracas: Imprenta Bolívar, 1881), xvii-xviii.
The evidence furthers an understanding of the extensive trade between the United States and Venezuela. It suggests that the two countries enjoyed a powerful, dynamic commercial relationship by the late nineteenth century. For the most part, the United States was Venezuela’s dominant trade partner not only for the exportation of basic commodities such as coffee, hides, and metals, but also for the importation of manufactured products. Moreover, the remarkable levels of importation suggest that such products were not only luxury goods for a wealthy elite, but also included mass-market goods for sale to broad sectors of the populace.

Anecdotal evidence from travelers who visited Venezuela during the late nineteenth century supports this hypothesis. William Corlett, a British traveler in the Western Hemisphere, noted upon arrival in Caracas that ordinary Venezuelans appeared “much given to jewelry and cigarettes” of the type that appeared on the shelves of the bodegas that Doña María and Doña Dilia visited. Edward Sullivan, another Brit, marveled at the cosmopolitan culture, especially the
impressive selection of U.S. imports: “we promenaded the town, and visited the market; the shops seemed remarkably good, much finer than any I had seen in America since leaving New York.” He also spoke of the broader prevalence of imported goods in this market, items that seemed on display for all of Venezuela’s purchasers: “You may, if you like, dine off beefsteak and potatoes cooled down with French claret or real London stout; . . . In fact, there is no luxury you cannot enjoy at a moderate expense.” It seems clear that imported commodities, especially from the United States, Great Britain, and France, stood out as these newcomers experienced Caracas society for the first time.

One must acknowledge that these travelers wrote as outsiders, and therefore perhaps might be unqualified to offer a systematic, encompassing narrative of Caracas culture and society. However, in the context of their discussions of the presence of imported material goods in Caracas, Corlett and Sullivan might be, in fact, the most reliable source for the information. These gentlemen had personal familiarity with the items’ original culture and described them in relation to an alien metropolitan landscape. The presence and integration of imported material culture stood out more to them than it would have to any local observer. Travel writers in Caracas viewed the presence and availability of North American and European commodities in Caracas as evidence of a growing cultural connection to the outside world, in addition to the commercial ties that the statistical data substantiate.

However, quantitative records of commercial ties and anecdotal accounts from European travelers to the region provide only part of the story. To explain the phenomenon of the Bald Eagle and the Native American Indian on packaging in Venezuela, one must go beyond the numbers and the accounts of foreign observers. Furthermore, one must recognize that the products that Doña María and Doña Dilia selected were not imported, but made in Venezuela or
Colombia. The symbolic use of these images suggests that the United States penetrated deep into the Venezuelan conscience and became linked inextricably to the most essential household and culinary staples of Venezuelan life, from cooking oil to candles. Thus, to explain how symbolic imagery of the United States entered the imaginary of the populace, one must turn to qualitative sources that explore the lived experience on the ground.

Advertisements for imported commodities in *El Cojo Ilustrado* offer one such line of evidence. They show a permeation of goods branded with references to the United States, suggesting that the appropriation of North American symbols on the packaging of Venezuelan products resulted from merchants’ desire to capitalize on widespread sentiments of desirability associated with perceived modernity and innovativeness of the capitalist giant to the north.

Many of the advertisements in *El Cojo Ilustrado* present oils, liquids, and other homeopathic treatments with mysterious and remarkable abilities to “cure” a broad spectrum of illnesses and conditions, from rheumatoid arthritis to denture pain to the whooping cough, and some claim to cure all of these symptoms and more. Almost without exception, the advertisements for these products highlight an association with the United States or North America. For example, a product for dentures named “Sozodonte” appears with the following line at the end of the advertisement: “Sold at drug stores, perfumeries, and pharmacies throughout the world . . . Hall & Ruckel, New York, EE.UU.”39 A product named “Talc-Boratado-Azufrados,” for gastrointestinal problems was “prepared by the Eminent . . . Dr. Rosa at his American laboratory in Montclair, New Jersey, EE.UU.”40 A most unusual potion, the “Emulsión de Scott,” claims to offer “complete healthiness . . . [it] has no rival for curing Rickets in children . . . Anemia . . . and all forms of disability” through “hypophosphites.” The creator of this remarkable tonic: “Scott and Bowne, Chemists, New York.”41 Finally, a product known as
“Pond’s Extract” claims to “cure rheumatism, cataracts, eye afflictions, injuries, contusions, insect bites . . . and all types of pain, inflammation, and hemorrhoids.” The bottom of the advertisement features the location of this product’s creation: “Pond’s Extract Co., 76 Fifth Ave., New York, E.U. de A.” Through their insistence in displaying the North American source, these advertisements seem to champion the United States as the center of medical breakthroughs, or at least exploit this perception among the consuming populace Caracas to increase revenues from these imported “miracle” pharmaceuticals.

The technological marvels of the United States appear in El Cojo Ilustrado as well. The February 1, 1898 edition of the newspaper ran an advertisement for the first gramophone to enter the Venezuelan marketplace: “The Great Gramophone, Speaking.” Venezuelans could place an order with the “Anglo-American Electrical M’Fg Co., 15 to 25 Whitehall St., New York City.” As with the medical potions, this advertisement celebrates the United States as the leader in technological innovation and manufacture. The product seems to target upper-class buyers who might be able to obtain U.S. dollars and remit postage across the ocean for the privilege of receiving one of the fabled devices. However, for the most part, the goods in these advertisements were of the sort that already existed in the physical marketplace, where ordinary people could purchase them using Bolívares and obtain the commodity immediately.

These advertisements offer compelling evidence to suggest that the United States occupied a position in the Venezuelan commercial mindset. One can conclude that residents of Caracas in particular, the likely target market for the distribution of El Cojo Ilustrado, viewed the United States, and the commodities and ideas emanating from it, as cutting-edge in design and technology. The use of these advertisements as revenue generators for the newspaper suggests that a broad readership had exposure to the innovative commodities in specific relation to their
“North Americanness”—their association with the United States and its values. Thus, the evidence from *El Cojo Ilustrado* suggests that late nineteenth-century Venezuelans had continual access to propagandistic rhetoric associated with the United States in close juxtaposition to material commodities, such as curative potions, described as innovative and desirable.

**The United States in a Venezuelan Periodical**

For the Bald Eagle and the Native American Indian to become part of the mindset of the Venezuelan population, these images would have to have become ensconced in the mindset of Caracas residents in multiple contexts, beyond the shelves of stores. Looking at a newspaper from the period can offer insights into the representative Venezuelan quotidian culture. Scholars consider *El Cojo Ilustrado* one of the most important Latin American periodicals from the end of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth. This newspaper includes substantial sections on current events, most occurring on other continents, with special emphasis on North America. Through them, one can begin to glimpse the place of the United States in Venezuela. Beginning in February of 1898, a series of eclectic articles presented an unusual compendium of U.S. news, some associated with science and technology, others in the political or “society” realms. The articles are far from what one might consider mainstream “global” reporting for ordinary Venezuelans. It is likely that the editors of *El Cojo Ilustrado* copied these short articles directly out of U.S. newspapers and translated them. The inclusion of these stories suggests that the editors in Caracas saw a competitive edge or potential profit margin by giving their readership a window into events thousands of miles away. The representational appearance of the United States in *El Cojo Ilustrado* by the late nineteenth century suggests that Venezuelans had a cultural fascination with the United States, contributing to their vision of North America as
they encountered the Bald Eagle and the Native American Indian on the shelves of the bodegas of Caracas.

For example, one article discusses the “movement of the population in New York,” including detailed statistical data on New York City: current population levels, births broken down by sex and race, marriages—an aspect of “sanitary life”—and illegitimate births. The article exudes a fascination with “corrupt” North American conceptions of the institution of marriage, highlighting the notion that “the majority [of births] result from mixed-race marriages (immigrant American and native American); thus, marriages between Americans each generation are less fecund.”45 It is likely that in the context of such radical social transformation throughout Latin America, and especially in a place with such close commercial ties to the outside world—previously with Europe, and now with the United States—that Venezuelans appreciated an opportunity to express satisfying sentiments of scorn for the perceived immorality of the “other,” in this case, the United States. Despite these sentiments, Venezuela had a large proportion of mixed-race marriages as well, though the data likely were less available and reliable at the time.46

This enthrallment with the United States appears in articles regarding the natural world, science, and technology as well. For example, one article discusses the upcoming solar eclipse of May 28, 1900, pointing to the best North American locations to witness the event: “60 meteorological stations have been installed in the regions of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi and Alabama where the eclipse will be visible.”47 Another article points to a discovery of “naturally-occurring asphalt” in Utah, an event that will put Utah on the map as one of the states richest in “natural resources” and give the United States a “secure domestic reserve of asphalt for various centuries.”48 Still another article points to the “attraction
of the North Pole” within the academic and wealthy communities, using as an example two 
“original” proposals for polar exploration, one in the Johns Hopkins University council to use a 
submarine to reach the North Pole. It also discusses a Californian speculator who seeks to 
construct a railroad above the ice. 49 Finally, a different sort of fascination with railroad 
technology comes across in an article describing a potential high-speed train service linking New 
York and Philadelphia: “Two American engineers, Mr. C.H. Davis and Mr. F.S. Williamson, 
present in a technical review their study of an electronic train service between New York and 
Philadelphia, a project that has not ceased to be considered daring..." 50

The use of these articles in El Cojo Ilustrado suggests that its editors sought to satisfy an 
insatiable thirst for modernity in Venezuela by bringing information on technological 
developments from abroad into the realm of the everyday purchaser. It does not seem 
coincidental that all of these articles came from the United States as opposed to Europe. While 
Great Britain and France might represent the ultimate “high culture,” the United States 
represented progress and modernity. Thus, the articles bolstered the commercial relationship 
between Venezuela and the United States—as the advertisements in the previous section make 
explicit—by highlighting the dazzling technological capabilities and aspirations in the United 
States. For the consuming public in Caracas, this discourse could have enhanced the desirability 
of North American commodities. While the precise function of this appropriation of North 
American news stories for consumption among the Venezuelan populace is not entirely clear, 
one can conclude that the editors of El Cojo Ilustrado saw a potential boost in readership, and 
therefore revenue, by including pieces of information about the outside world, especially the 
United States.
Conclusion

The argument and evidence in this paper suggest a remarkable contradiction, one that remains at the forefront of scholarly and popular musings on the current political dynamic between the United States and the government of Hugo Chávez Frías in Venezuela. The dichotomy between the limited official diplomacy and “anti-yanqui” intellectual discourse on the one hand, and the powerful North American commercial influence on the other, makes one wonder how ordinary Venezuelan experienced it on the ground. *El Cojo Ilustrado* epitomizes this multidimensional relationship. This periodical might contain the writings of Blanco Fombona and Rubén Darío in the front section, condemning the United States for its supposed aspirations for imperial domination of the hemisphere. And yet, the very same issue containing the news briefs copied from North American newspapers, along with the imported commodities appearing in the advertising section, might present a triumphalist discourse on the United States, celebrating technological innovation, modernity, and progress. How might an ordinary member of the Venezuelan public reconcile all of these powerful and often contradictory currents?

The statistical data from late nineteenth-century illustrate that neither the lack of a substantive official relationship nor the impassioned pleas of intellectual skeptics had much influence on the mindset of the ordinary consuming public, people such as Doña María and Doña Dilia. Based on the levels of importation from, and exportation to, the United States during this period, one can conclude that the contemporaries of these fictional characters existed in a commercial world that already emulated North American consumer culture. Thus, Venezuela’s national obsession for purchasing U.S. goods had its origins in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Ewell’s description of “Americanization” is accurate, but the process happened well before the “petroleum empire” began to take shape.
In some respects, one must return to those scholars who point to romanticized notions of destiny in the growing commercial cohesion of Venezuela and the United States. While these sentiments exist in an esoteric realm for which historical evidence often does not exist, the case of Venezuela suggests that, indeed, underlying fascination for the progress and modernity of the United States made purchasers in Venezuela seek a piece of it for themselves. This “piece” took the physical form of imported commodities but also existed in the subconscious realm because the bar of soap or a package of matches bore a symbol of the United States, such as the Native American Indian or the Bald Eagle.

Ultimately, this paper points to a relationship based on trade, not official connections, between the two countries. By itself, this intervention is not a new one. However, using the product packaging from the Litografía del Comercio printing stones, this paper shows that a dynamic cultural discourse in the realm of materiality provided a quotidian foundation for the broader macroeconomic relationship. Despite irregular and even contradictory official and intellectual connections to the United States, ordinary Venezuelans saw the oversized neighbor to the north as an inevitable and exciting part of their future, and they demonstrated their determination to fashion a modern Venezuela on it.
APPENDIX A
Collage of Doña María’s Purchases
APPENDIX B
Collage of Doña Dilia’s Purchases\textsuperscript{52}
See Doña María’s purchases in Appendix A, and Doña Dilia’s in Appendix B.


5 Ewell, 67-68.


8 Karl May, *Winnetou: Erster Band* (Bamberg, Germany: Karl-May-Verlag, 1951); Ibid., *Winnetou: Zweiter Band* (Bamberg, Germany: Karl-May-Verlag, 1951); Ibid., *Winnetou: Dritter Band* (Bamberg, Germany: Karl-May-Verlag, 1951). These novels were part of a larger literary phenomenon associated with a fascination across Europe with the place of the “Indian.” José Miguel Salazar notes that stereotypes are an essential component of identity for any group, including Venezuelans: “Stereotypes settle on a very human characteristic of categorizing and simplifying in excess . . . like it or not, stereotypes exist, transmit, reinforce, and guide human conduct.” José Miguel Salazar, “Perspectivas psicosociales de la identidad venezolana,” *Identidades Nacionales en América Latina*, Coord. José Miguel Salazar (Caracas, Venezuela: Fondo Editorial de Humanidades y Educación, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 2001), 117.


12 Ibid., 21-23. On the shipping claims: “En efecto, [la precariedad económica] se trató de dificultades usualmente originadas por los daños sufridos por los norteamericanos como consecuencia del estado de turbulencia política que aquejaba al país, así como por la desatención del gobierno venezolano a los reclamos hechos por los cónsules de EE.UU. en La Guaira y Puerto Cabello en relación con esos daños, y por el presunto trato discriminatorio que Venezuela daba a los buques norteamericanos vis-à-vie el recibido por los que ostentaban pabellón británico.” Ibid., 31. The issue of claims regarding maritime vessels was central to discourse on Venezuela within the houses of the U.S. Congress, as the first major section of this paper argues.

13 Ewell, 2.


For a thorough discussion of the historical background leading to the creation of the commission, and also for several examples of these claims with dollar amounts, see a report to the Committee on Foreign Affairs reprinted in “Proceedings and Debates of the Forty-Fourth Congress, First Session,” Congressional Record (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1876), 5467-5471.


“Proceedings and Debates of the Forty-Fourth Congress, First Session,” 5467-5475.


Belrose explains that relations between Latin America and the United States were a central issue for intellectuals in the region before World War I, especially in the wake of the War of 1898, one of the earliest projections of U.S. influence—political, military, economic, and symbolic—into Latin America.

Maurice Belrose, “Latinidad vs. imperialismo yanqui en El Cojo Ilustrado, 1898-1903,” Casa de las Américas 211 (1998), 72-73. The invocation of Shakespeare’s play enjoys some popularity among scholars, though some employ it to describe the earlier relationship between Britain and its colonies, pointing to the similarities between the plot of the play and the shipwreck account of Sir Thomas Gates in 1609 near Bermuda as he sailed from Britain to become the new governor of Virginia. Shakespeare himself was an investor in the Virginia Company. Others link the caricaturized figures of Caliban and Prospero in The Tempest to the process of Spanish exploration and colonization of the Caribbean islands. See Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); also, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

Belrose, 73.

Ibid., 74.

Ibid.

Ibid., 75.

Ibid.

Ibid. Darío believed that the United States already had “conquered” Mexico and Central America, leaving South America as the new frontier of potential resistance. The term “Latino” in this context refers to the common
understanding of its use during the nineteenth-century—in reference to the people of Latin America—not today’s usage to refer to people of Latin American ancestry living in the United States.

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Petrásh, 19-20.
31 Ewell, 45; *Statistical Annuary of the United States of Venezuela* (Caracas, Venezuela: Government's Lithographic and Steam Printing Office, 1884), 7; *Anuario Estadistico de los Estados Unidos de Venezuela, 1894* (Caracas, Venezuela: Tipografía Moderna, 1896), 225, 229.
32 Ewell, 70-72.
33 *Anuario Estadistico de los Estados Unidos de Venezuela, 1891* (Caracas, Venezuela: Imprenta y Litografía del Gobierno Nacional, 1891), 166-167.
34 *Segundo censo de la república: Decreto del ilustre americano General Guzmán Blanco, Presidente de la República* (Caracas: Imprenta Bolívar, 1881), xvii-xx.
35 Corlett, 100.
38 Indeed, the cultural connections had become so pronounced that by the mid-nineteenth century, Caracas youths were speaking rudimentary forms of French and English in everyday life, as Consejero Lisboa, the first ambassador to Venezuela from the Empire of Brazil, reported in 1853: “The use of the French language by young people is common in Caracas and that of the English language is becoming vulgarized [sic] as well. We can attribute this development to the facility of communication with Europe and the proximity of the United States…” Consejero Lisboa, *Relación de un viaje a Venezuela, Nueva Granada y Ecuador* (Caracas, Venezuela; Madrid, Spain: Ediciones de la presidencia de la República de Venezuela, 1954), 101.
39 *El Cojo Ilustrado* 1 Feb 1892, 58; Ibid., 1 Feb 1898, 130; Ibid., 15 Feb 1898, 210; Ibid., 1 Apr 1898, 284; Ibid., 15 Apr 1898, 319; Ibid., 15 May 1898, 390; Ibid., 1 June 1898, 426.
40 *El Cojo Ilustrado* 1 Feb 1892, 58; Ibid., 1 Jan 1898, 94; Ibid., 15 Feb 1898, 210; Ibid., 15 Mar 1898, 245; Ibid., 1 Apr 1898, 284; Ibid., 15 Apr 1898, 318.
41 *El Cojo Ilustrado* 15 May 1898, 94; Ibid., 15 Mar 1898, 245; Ibid., 15 Apr 1898, 319.
42 *El Cojo Ilustrado* 1 Jun 1898, 426.
43 *El Cojo Ilustrado* 1 Feb 1898, 129; Ibid., 15 Feb 1898, 169; Ibid., 15 Mar 1898, 245.
45 The significance of this statement is unclear. *El Cojo Ilustrado* 15 Jan 1898, 87-88.
Winthrop R. Wright discusses the sociocultural significance of nineteenth-century racial mixing in cosmopolitan Venezuela in *Café Con Leche: Race, Class, and National Image in Venezuela* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), especially in “Whitening the Population, 1850-1900,” 43-68.

El Cojo Ilustrado 15 Feb 1898, 161.

El Cojo Ilustrado 1 Apr 1898, 278. It is possible that the Cojo editors might have mistranslated or misinterpreted some naturally occurring mineral as “asphalt,” given that it is illogical under today’s definition.

El Cojo Ilustrado 15 May 1898, 386.

El Cojo Ilustrado 15 Feb 1898, 161. It is interesting to note the English spellings of “New York” and “Philadelphia,” strong evidence suggesting that the Cojo editors lifted the article directly out of a North American newspaper.

Digital photographs in 2007 by the author of lithographic printing stones from Litografía del Comercio, Caracas, Venezuela.