CHAPTER 11

Performance and Propaganda in Spanish America during the War of the Spanish Succession

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In September 1708, the royal officials of Caracas submitted to the Spanish crown a zealous handwritten account of their nine-day festivities commemorating the birth of Don Luis, the prince of Asturias. Held a year earlier, the celebrations honouring the new-born heir to the throne included public acclamations of Philip V as true king of Spain, followed by illuminations, military and religious processions, and a banquet hosted by French slave traders. Despite the hardships endured throughout the Caribbean during the War of the Spanish Succession, the spectacles in Venezuela also facilitated the collection of ten thousand pesos in silver for the urgencies of the Bourbons’ European and North African campaigns. More importantly for local elites, however, the account served as an opportunity to discredit ‘idle voices’ circulating from Havana that the caraqueños had recently proclaimed Archduke Charles as their sovereign with the aide of Dutch forces in Curaçao—allies of the Habsburgs. Such an incident had notoriously occurred in Venezuela in 1702 and had required immediate counteraction. Six years later, the royal officials needed the account of their celebrations for the prince of Asturias to reassure Philip V of his ‘reacclamation’ by the populace as well as their full commitment to the Bourbon dynasty’s objectives in the war: victory over the enemy Dutch and English, the defence of a united Spanish monarchy, and the preservation of the Catholic faith.1

Spectacle accounts such as these have provided scholars with rich source material for understanding the experiences of the War of the Spanish Succession as a global conflict—above all, the uncertainty and disorder the war provoked in the Iberian Atlantic World. The crown’s particular demands for wartime spectacles and their execution by viceregal officials were supposed to emphasize the coherence of a single monarchy working together in a time of crisis to preserve Bourbon rule over the Spanish empire. Nonetheless, while Spanish colonial accounts do convey a sense of shared imperial struggle, they

1 Cabildo of Caracas to Philip V, Caracas, 3 September 1708, Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Santo Domingo, 717.
also expose a heightened sense of discord and rivalry between social groups, cities, and even competing European empires as a result of the dynastic transition. These public performances do in fact emphasize the larger connections Spanish-American subjects had to the succession crisis as well as their role in its final conclusion and victory. Among other things, these acclamations of Philip V demonstrate the importance of public rituals in legitimizing political authority, reinforcing unity within the Hispanic monarchy, and mediating local concerns in late colonial Spanish America.

Legitimating the new dynasty’s rule over Spanish America—the world’s most important silver-producing region—was an urgent concern for Philip V and his closest advisors. Although it was unclear whether or not armed conflict would erupt in Europe, by November 1700 ministers of state in Madrid were convinced that the succession and subsequent ‘Union of the Two Crowns’ between Spain and France would prompt the English and the Dutch to instigate a war in the Americas. These fears were well-founded, as evident in the outbreak of violence in the Caribbean and Pacific Rim beginning in the summer of 1702 and lasting through the end of 1712. As colonial correspondence and wartime maps suggest, the Habsburgs’ allies responded to the dynastic quarrel in Europe with a commercial war targeting the silver fleets and principal Spanish-American trade routes.² Throughout this period, Anglo-Dutch agents used both aggressive measures (such as commerce raiding) and peaceful means (such as pamphleteering and smuggling) in their attempts to persuade Spanish colonial subjects to recognize Habsburg sovereignty as a challenge to Philip V’s alliance with the French.³

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² Pierre Mortier, Téâtre de la guerre en Amerique telle qu'elle est à present possèdée par les Espagnols, Anglois, François, et Hollandois &c. (Amsterdam: P. Mortier, 1703). For example, Mortier’s map highlights important Spanish colonial trade routes targeted by the Dutch and English navies in the Caribbean. By the end of the seventeenth century, the viceroyalties of New Spain and Peru had become the world’s most lucrative markets for African slaves and European manufactured goods (above all, luxury textiles)—demands stimulated by the mining economies of Northern Mexico and the Andes.

³ David Marley’s Wars of the Americas: a Chronology of Armed Conflict in the Western Hemisphere (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008) offers the broadest overview of the military history of Spanish America during the War of the Spanish Succession. Charles Arnade and W. Stitt Robinson have written about the earliest skirmishes in Spanish Florida and the northern borderlands. J. Ignacio Rubio Mañé deals with confrontations between novohispanic militias and Jamaican privateers and logwood cutters in the Yucatan Peninsula in El Virreinato, Vol. III: Expansión y defensa (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1983). Carla Rahn Phillips, Charles Boxer, and Eduardo Brazão have written about major naval battles such as the English admiral Charles Wager’s assault on the Peruvian silver fleet at