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Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, editor. Mexican Literature as World Literature. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

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Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, editor. Mexican Literature as World Literature. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

Abstract

Review of Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, editor. *Mexican Literature as World Literature*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 266 pp.

Keywords

Mexico, world literature

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Chapter 2 of the edited collection *Mexican Literature as World Literature* opens with a telling anecdote: the author of the chapter, Stephanie Kirk, was rejected from a seminar on early modern culture because a senior colleague "disputed the notion that Mexico constituted a part of the early modern world" (23). The collection's analysis of "world literature" is a rebuttal to precisely this kind of persistent bias in Anglophone studies of Latin America. *Mexican Literature as World Literature* is part of a large series, *Literatures as World Literature*, whose description asks, "Can the literature of a specific country, author, or genre be used to approach the elusive concept of 'world literature'?" For editor Ignacio Sánchez Prado, this serves as a prompt for writing against conceptions of world literature that have long cast Mexico and Latin America as a "creative periphery" (2) or "purveyors of resistance through cultural specificity" (106). Drawing on theorists such as Alexander Beecroft, Wai Chee Dimock, Pheng Cheah, and Emily Apter, the collection's contributors collectively argue that Mexican literature has long been engaged in global conversations, and has always integrated a large constellation of literature in national cultural debates.

Sánchez Prado describes "world literature" as a literature with "multicentric attachments to national, regional, and world literary systems" (107). Contributor Oswaldo Zavala adds an important methodological perspective, writing that critiquing approaches that center Europe requires "detailed study of the specific material conditions of cultural production" (219). *Mexican Literature as World Literature's* fifteen chronologically arranged essays, then, center exchange flows and institutions in their examination of Mexican literature, and analyze a wide variety of entanglements with other international traditions.

The collection's first four chapters argue that Mexico was not peripheral to the colonial world, but a diverse center. "Once commercial exchange between Mexico and the Philippines began in 1573, Mexico City effectively became the center of the world" (7), writes Jorge Téllez in Chapter 1. These early chapters use a variety of texts, such as Rafael Landívar's *Rusticatio Mexicana* (*Mexican Country Scenes*) and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora's *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* (*The Misfortunes of Alonso Ramírez*), to examine the interplay between colonial translations of the classics, Greek- and Latin-inspired texts in Spanish, creole study of Indigenous languages, and the New World Baroque. They also set up an argument that spans chapters 6, 7, and 8: that 20th-century Mexican literature and cultural institutions had an inherent cosmopolitanism afforded by longstanding engagement with the classics.

The idea of Mexico as the "center of the world" carries into Chapters 5 and 6, which direct their attention to the way that Mexico's position relative to

global trade flows in the nineteenth century shaped its literature, and to the complicated relationship between Mexican writers, the Porfirian regime, and European institutions. The attention to the nineteenth century is unfortunately brief—but moving quickly through expanses of time is an understandable risk of any anthology with a *longue durée* perspective. Still, the chapters provide important connective tissue between the colonial and twentieth-century sections of the text.

Many of the collection's chapters take institutions as their object of study, perhaps because they provide strong evidence that Mexican literature has always been engaged in global conversations and has always integrated a large constellation of literature in national debates over literature and culture. Chapter 3, "World-Making in the New Spain of the Eighteenth Century," argues that "*criollo* patriotism" and colonial study of indigenous languages in institutions such as the College of Santa Cruz Tlatelolco challenge the binary of "colonizer/colonized [...] central to discussions of world literature" (45). Sánchez Prado's Chapter 7, which has an elegant thesis about the intersecting geographical scales of the career of Alfonso Reyes, builds on this chapter to discuss the cultural nationalism of twentieth-century Mexican literary institutions. Chapter 10, "Brief History of an Anthology of Mexican Poetry" by Gustavo Guerrero, discusses Mexico's influence on the early years of UNESCO, while Chapters 13 and 14 consider the privatization of culture during Mexico's turn to neoliberalism.

In the project of re-framing "world literature" through careful attention to the material conditions of literary production, Chapter 15, "Planetary Poetics of Extinction" by Carolyn Fornoff, felt like an outlier. The chapter's subject matter—the work of writers Isabel Zapata and Karen Villeda—is the most contemporary of the collection, and is the only chapter besides Chapter 2, "Global Sor Juana," to focus on female writers. Fornoff defines world literature as asking "what happens when we stop equating Mexican literature with the delimited confines of the nation-state" (231) and argues that Villeda and Zapata's respective decisions to write about extinction through events distant from Mexico "is a way of depoliticizing the issue while still retaining its planetary ethical implications" (235). Yet Fornoff's interpretation fails to consider the material and institutional perspectives so crucial to the book's other chapters: the social class implied by a cosmopolitan perspective, the role of US creative writing institutions (Villeda and Zapata studied at the University of Iowa and NYU, respectively), and the way that American MFAs, command of English, and access to global circuits of cultural capital currently cleave Mexico City's arts milieus. I argue that the two writers fall closer to the neoliberal intellectual described by Zavala in Chapter 14—writers who "have sought a place outside of the sociopolitical demands of an engaged intellectual" (217)—or to Sánchez Prado's idea of "strategic occidentalism," in

which writers derive cultural capital in their home countries from adopting a cosmopolitan stance (223).

Mexican Literature as World Literature's arguments—that Mexico's literature has long reflected the complexity of the country's economic and political exchanges, and that a classical and cosmopolitan perspective is fundamental to Mexican cultural institutions—are compelling rebuttals to US and European scholarship that has repeatedly provincialized Mexico and Latin America. The collection's methods and perspectives have the possibility to significantly enrich Anglophone scholarship about Mexico. Though its insights will likely feel evident to Mexican scholars, its corrective perspective is necessary for Anglophone students of Mexican literature—from undergraduates to professors—to gain the tools for seeing outside the often-problematic assumptions that underlie studies of Latin America in the United States.

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