

MEXICAN LITERATURE AS WORLD LITERATURE
EDITED BY IGNACIO M. SÁNCHEZ PRADO

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Ever since Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur* to refer to literature's cross-border capacity, the category has remained highly contested. 'World Literature' has in turns been praised for its inclusive potential and derided for its myopic liberal naiveté. Whatever the case, scholarly discourse around it has tended to relegate Latin America to the peripheries. *Mexican Literature as World Literature* (2021) addresses this exclusion head on and unearths the many ways Mexican literary writers throughout history have embraced the idea of 'world-making', or, more specifically, 'the ways that cultural texts represent the world, or better said, a world—and make it intelligible for others' (39). In his introduction, editor Ignacio Sánchez Prado promises that the book is 'neither an attempt to justify Mexican literature's inclusion in world literary canons nor an application of world literature theory to Mexican literature' (3). Notwithstanding, many of the essays in the volume do just this, contending, more often than not disagreeing, with many of the foundational names of world literature theory—Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, Franco Moretti—as they sketch out the worldly dimensions of the Mexican literature of different epochs.

The volume has a historical focus, following a periodized structure, from sixteenth-century New Spain to twenty-first century Mexican novelists and poets. This approach allows for both scope and detail, as each of the authors tackles Mexican literature's negotiation with the rest of the world. The first four essays deal with 'world-making' in the New Spain, during the *virreinato*, the three centuries of Spanish empire (1521-1821). In the first of these, Jorge Téllez investigates the global scale of neo-Hispanic literary networks in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Téllez: 'Once commercial exchange between Mexico and the Philippines began in 1573, Mexico City effectively became the centre of the world.' (7) The global importance of transpacific sea-lanes in connecting the Spanish colonies is picked up and further elaborated on by Laura Torres-Rodríguez, who argues for the relevance of the 'East Asia-Mexico connection' (55) in discussions of neo-Hispanic participation in world literature.

Stephanie Kirk surveys the global reception of the New Spain's most representative world-literature figure, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and highlights uneven perceptions of her 'universality'. Kirk argues that many of the unequal geographic dynamics that existed in Sor Juana's time persist to this day in the way she has continued to be read as 'Mexican' when playing to pre-conceived European notions of otherness, and as European when not. Karen Stolley takes on the eighteenth century, one of the less-discussed periods of the *virreinato*, and elucidates the relationship between the Mexican 'ciudad letrada' (40) and the global Republic of Letters. Stolley delves into neo-Aztecism, the Jesuit intellectual movement celebrating indigenous culture—whose representatives include Francisco Javier Clavijero and Antonio de León y Gama—which sowed the seeds of political independence in the New Spain. Stolley makes a compelling argument for the importance of these neo-Hispanic *criollo* thinkers within wider Enlightenment debates, writing: 'the Americas were often the laboratory where enlightened ideas about nature, human agency, governance, and empire were employed, contested, and negotiated on the ground' (45).

Moving into the first century of Mexican independence, Shelley Garrigan traces the complex interplay between lettered efforts at constructing a distinct national identity—'the

'Mexicanization of letters' (72)—and the so-called 'Western' literary canon. Garrigan details the histories of key institutions in the inception of 'Mexican' literature—the *Academia de Letrán* and the *Biblioteca Nacional*—exploring the way Mexican literati courted non-Spanish 'western' literary models, particularly the French, in their processes of nation-building. Adela Pineda Franco then takes on the task of exploring *modernismo*, perhaps the nineteenth century's most significant Latin American literary movement, from the vantage point of world literature theory. *Modernismo*, as envisioned by Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, is tied to late-century liberal conceptions of cosmopolitanism. However, Pineda Franco argues, the august cultural and political climate of the *Porfiriato* (the period of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship between the years 1877 and 1910) gives Mexican *modernismo* a particular flavour, distinct from appeals to world-brotherhood from expatriates like Darío and Cuban writer José Martí. Pineda Franco unearths the complicity between Mexican *modernistas* like Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera and Amado Nervo, and the hollow progress, stability, and cosmopolitanism of Porfirio Díaz's regime.

All but two of the remaining essays then focus on Mexican literature in the twentieth century. Editor Ignacio Sánchez Prado centres Mexican humanist Alfonso Reyes's ideas of 'universalismo'—a Goethian model of spiritual literary unity with the world—in order to highlight literary Mexico's engagement with the rest of the globe. Sánchez Prado notes that the world-making interest of Mexican literature in this century—the fact that Mexican writers saw themselves as writing *in* and *to* the world—might come as a surprise to Anglophone literary scholars who, he claims, 'on the rare cases when they focus on Mexican writers, often read them as purveyors of resistance through cultural specificity' (106). Sara Porter then goes on to deal with the 'duelling cosmopolitanisms' (120) of the Mexican avant-gardes: the overtly revolutionary *Estridentistas* on the one hand, and the apolitical aestheticist *Contemporáneos*—including Jaime Torres Bodet and Salvador Novo—on the other. Next, Manuel Gutiérrez Silva offers an admirable overview of the global reception of the literature, aesthetics, and politics of Mexico's Nobel laureate, Octavio Paz. This is followed by Gustavo Guerrero's history of one of Paz's specific world literature projects, the *Anthologie de la poésie mexicaine* (1952), commissioned by UNESCO in the postwar period to introduce Mexican literature to the world. The anthology was translated by Guy Lévis Mano into French and by fellow Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett into English (*Anthology of Mexican Poetry*, 1958), but ultimately suffered under the weight of editorial and political pressures.

Canonical novelists Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes receive a chapter each, written by Nuala Finnegan and *Crack* novelist Pedro Ángel Palou respectively (the *Crack* generation is a literary movement attempting to reclaim the aesthetics of the Latin American Boom). Palou's essay on Fuentes's self-construction as a world author stands out in both style and substance, as he examines Fuentes's legacy as part of the *Boom latinoamericano* and beyond, through the respectful yet critical eyes of a former protégé Iván Eusebio Aguirre Darancou. He devotes some attention to the world-reaching ambitions of the countercultural *Literatura de la onda* of the sixties and seventies, arguing that authors like Parménides García Saldaña and Fernando del Paso simultaneously portray local specificity through the use of slang, and belonging to a world community through pop culture references. In the first of the two essays on Mexico in the twenty-first century, Oswaldo Zavala unearths a neoliberal undercurrent in what he identifies as the two political poles of the current Mexican literary scene, exemplified by Paco Ignacio Taibo II on one end, and Valeria Luiselli on the other. According to Zavala, the continuities between the performance of these two authors as public intellectuals demonstrate the ways Mexican literature has internalized the mechanics and ambitions of neoliberalism. In this sense, Zavala argues, 'world literature' becomes a marketing objective in a globalized economy, a far cry from Reyes's humanist universalism.

The volume's overall focus on history and the material circumstances of canon formation and world-literary systems perhaps come at the cost of the literature itself. Zavala, for example, devotes much attention to unearthing Luiselli and Taibo's politics through their tweets and conference appearances, but neglects a close look at any of their novels. Of the fifteen essays contained in the collection, only two foreground close readings. Nuala Finnegan presents her argument for Juan Rulfo's 'World Literary Consciousness' through a lucid analysis of his short story 'El paso del norte' (from *El llano en llamas*, 1953), while Carolyn Fornoff pays attention to form in sketching out contemporary poets Isabel Zapata and Karen Villeda's approach to ecopolitics. Regardless, this collection suggests fresh and exciting directions for the study of 'world-making' in Mexican literature. As literary scholars continue to rethink the category of 'world literature', there is ample opportunity for sustained study of the global dimensions of Mexican texts that pays particular attention to literary specificity.