

Sánchez-Prado, Ignacio M. *Strategic Occidentalism: On Mexican Fiction, the Neoliberal Book Market, and the Question of World Literature*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2018. 248 pp.

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In this book's three chapters, Ignacio Sánchez-Prado explores the works of several post-1968 Mexican fiction authors in order to elaborate a new, more comprehensive understanding of the concept of "world literature" and its relationship to literary production in Mexico. Sánchez-Prado seeks to problematize critical treatments of Mexican literature that are rooted in nationalism and cultural specificity, recasting the oeuvres of important Mexican authors in light of their interactions with literary influences from around the globe and with the neoliberal book market. He argues that individual authors construct their own *personal* world literatures as a way of contending with a pair of problematic imperatives: first, to project an authentic vision of national identity through their work, and second, to compete for notoriety and commercial success within the publishing market. The book's title, *Strategic Occidentalism*, references Sánchez-Prado's preferred term to denominate these deliberate acts of authorial self-positioning.

Sánchez-Prado does not subscribe to a Damroschian notion of world literature that would include only literary works that circulate transnationally. Instead, he proposes that world literature is fundamentally defined by "the material networks and practices that construct its archives and repertoire" (15). Thus, even works that have not been translated or that have enjoyed only limited circulation abroad can still be considered part of world literature in the sense that they owe their existence to the unique agglomeration of national and international influences that shaped the author's stylistic and thematic decisions. In accordance with this material focus, close textual readings are not the critic's primary approach to analyzing the selection of works his book presents (though they are certainly present). Rather, he dedicates significant space to contextualizing the authors' production within both the Mexican literary canon and a more global context, underscoring relevant elements of their biographies and emphasizing their shifting relationships with different types of publishers over the course of their careers.

Sánchez-Prado presents his seven case studies to the reader in roughly chronological order, underscoring the relationship between different authors in terms of both genealogical legacies and

intergenerational shifts. The first chapter is the book's most in-depth study of an individual author, focusing exclusively on "Mexican literature's leading cosmopolitan" Sergio Pitol, whose extensive travels and encounters with other cultures and literatures shaped his literary trajectory (25). The critic argues that Pitol's contributions to translation, literary criticism, autobiography, and fiction during the 1970s and 80s established a new, heterodox form of cosmopolitanism and worldly engagement that laid the groundwork for a shift in the understanding of Mexican literature within Mexico and internationally. He shows particular interest in Pitol's translation of works from literary traditions such as the Eastern European avant-garde and Anglophone modernism, much of which he did while living abroad. His selection of works to translate—including those of Witold Gombrowicz, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and many others—evidence the construction of an alternative world literature canon consisting of authors who resisted the imperative to write serious, national literature, instead employing unorthodox modernist aesthetics such as estrangement and the carnivalesque. Sánchez-Prado demonstrates how Pitol's own fiction draws from the narrative techniques he admired in other national literatures, using these alternative, worldly genealogies as a tool to expand the realm of Mexican fiction beyond the 20<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of the totalizing political narrative. In both his 1979 short story "Nocturno de Bujara" and his 1984 novel *El desfile del amor*, Pitol deploys the disorienting intertwining of unreliable narrative threads as a strategy to reveal "the impossibility of using literature to construct memory or meaning" (64).

In the second chapter, Sánchez-Prado turns his attention to the Crack group, a loosely-organized collective of Mexican writers whose fiction, published starting in the mid-1990s, sought to challenge both the existing stereotypes surrounding Latin American literary production and the false dichotomy between high art and commercial literature. As is well known, faced with the challenge of gaining visibility for their work without conforming to the magical realist imperative, Pedro Ángel Palou, Eloy Urroz, Ignacio Padilla, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, and Jorge Volpi published the "Crack Manifesto" in 1996, proclaiming their goal to combat what they perceived as the trivialization of literature as a result of market forces. However, the critic argues that, rather than shunning the commercial market, each of the chapter's featured authors used his own individual set of strategies to insert comparatively dense literary works into this system of circulation. In his 1999 novel *En busca de Klingsor*, Jorge Volpi combines a diverse series of elements, including detective fiction, mathematical notions of uncertainty, and a portrayal of Nazism as part of world (not just European) history to create a commercially successful work that is thematically and stylistically complex, and that firmly rejects the national-cosmopolitan dichotomy. Ignacio Padilla's *Amphitryon* (2000) also takes up the theme of

Nazism in a bid to question literature's capacity to serve as historical allegory, while his later work *La Gruta del Toscano* (2006) performs a symbolic Orientalization of Europe, deflecting the exoticism to which Latin American authors and literature have so often been exposed. Finally, Pedro Ángel Palou's *Paraíso clausurado* (2000) deploys melancholy and loss as tools to articulate the impossibility of creating a totalizing novel, demonstrating that new narrative possibilities open up when authors are freed from this unattainable imperative.

In the third and final chapter, Sánchez-Prado takes up the examples of three authors who employ distinct tactics to question and redefine what it means to be a "Mexican woman writer" in relation to the conditions of the neoliberal editorial market. He foregrounds his analysis by noting the implicitly gendered nature of the Crack group's ideological self-positioning: their manifesto responded critically to a process of editorial neoliberalization that coincided with the so-called *Boom femenino* and enabled the commercial success of oft-maligned romance novelists such as Laura Esquivel. In this context, the Mexican women writers that Sánchez-Prado presents use strategic positioning to productively confront the compounded assumptions imposed on them based on their nationality and their gender. He highlights Carmen Boullosa's history of "deftly navigat[ing] editorial landscapes" by publishing alternately with commercial publishers and more prestigious ones to show how Bourdieusian notions regarding the autonomy of symbolic capital breaks down in the case of women authors for whom commercial success can serve as an antidote to marginality (155). For her part, Ana García Bergua's decision to eschew autobiographical tendencies and locate her adventure novel *El umbral* (1993) outside of traditionally feminized spaces expands the range of narrative possibilities available to women authors, while her mobilization of her identity as the daughter of Spanish exiles disrupts essentializing stereotypes about the cultural specificity of Mexican literature. The final author studied in this chapter, Cristina Rivera Garza, engages with questions of materiality and circulation in various ways, using novels such as *Nadie me verá llorar* (1999) and *La cresta de Ilión* (2002) to reveal the gendered silences and omissions that exist within historical and literary archives, while also helping to redefine 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature's relationship with new media through her long-running blog, *No hay tal lugar*.

This book ultimately succeeds in its self-proclaimed attempt to "reclaim the idea of 'world literature,'" fundamentally reframing Mexico's participation in global networks by analyzing the plethora of strategies that Mexican authors have implemented in order to challenge and negotiate the imperatives of the neoliberal market and construct their own world literatures in the process (191). While Sánchez-Prado's work will of course be of interest to his fellow Latin Americanists, and to

Mexicanists in particular, the theoretical perspectives he outlines make this book an essential reference for any literary scholars looking to contextualize the works they study within a framework that does not view literature through either a purely national lens or a totalizing global one, but rather embraces the potentiality and plurality of world literatures.