Estrada, Oswaldo. *Troubled Memories. Iconic Mexican Women and the Traps of Representation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. Print. 244 pp.

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The women we encounter in this book are most likely already familiar to most readers interested in Mexican literature and culture. But this is not to say that we have exhausted the possibilities for the diverse approaches that we can still have towards them as subject matters. That is precisely what Oswaldo Estrada demonstrates in *Troubled Memories. Iconic Mexican Women and the Traps of Representation* (2018). In the study of what he coins as "iconic Mexican women," the author aims to understand how amply recognized female public figures such as Sor Juana, la Malinche or Frida Kahlo, are being deployed in contemporary Mexican literature and the different ways this presence informs us about the changes that the literary field (and the lettered city for that matter) are experiencing in the twenty-first century.

The use of the term iconic for these characters is not gratuitous: it informs how Estrada understands the intertwining between them and the construction of a national identity. As he explains in the Introduction, "Iconic Mexican Women at the Threshold of a New Century": "Precisely because of their transformative power, the women that I study in this book . . . have become, like other cultural icons, objects of consumerism. Not coincidentally, all of them have appeared on Mexican currency" (2). Very brilliantly noting the appearance of these female characters in the most commodified way possible, the quote presents two key elements that appear throughout the book: one, that these women, when turned into icons, are malleable and have the ability to transform themselves depending on what is being mobilized through them, and, two, that Estrada aims to trace the relation between these appearances and consumerism, the fact that these women can, and have been transformed, into commodities. Each of the icons selected has a specific role within the construction of national identity in Mexico, and they exist because "Mexican culture needs an indigenous woman to carry the heavy weight of the Conquest: a criolla prodigy whose intellect defies coloniality; an altruistic patriot who fights to free her nation from the Spanish Crown; a loyal Adelita who follows her Juan, unconditionally, to build a better Mexico; and a controversial artist whose difference, otherness, and disabilities fuel stories of empowerment and success" (3).

In Chapter One, "Forget me not. Malinche's Struggles in Twenty-First-Century Mexico" (17-59), Estrada begins by analyzing the different forms of appearance that this character has had (including its presence in the "crónicas de Indias" genre, specifically Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Breve histo*ria) and the way each of these iterations works. From the mother of all Mexicans that went through the process of rape turning herself into "La Chingada" mother, as Octavio Paz wrote in his famous *Labyrinth of Solitude* essay, to the reinterpretation of her own power in the hands of the Chicana tradition that read her as a double agent thanks to her bilingual quality, Estrada emphasizes the question of agency in the representation of this character throughout history. In order to do this he analyzes four literary works: the play La Malinche (2000) by Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda and the novels *Amor y conquista: la novela de Malinalli mal llamada la Malinche* (1999) by Marisol Martín del Campo, Malinche (2006) by Laura Esquivel, and *La verdadera historia de Malinche* (2010) by Fanny del Río. As the names themselves reveal, and Estrada clearly points out, there is a tendency in contemporary literature to focus on the in-love quality of this historic character, which according to the author is "in sync with a neoliberal attitude that seeks to liberate sexuality from its mysterious aura through copious descriptions of sexual practices and desires" (24). Reviewing the literary products through specific lenses (translation and treason, religion, sexuality and knowledge), each of the subchapters lays the foundations for his analysis of this indigenous character as a vessel where Mexican anxieties regarding the past are still visible, even when there is a clear attempt to give her back some of the power that has been taken away from her throughout the centuries.

In Chapter Two, "Impossible Nun. Sor Juana and the Traps of Representation" (60-99), Estrada is interested in the fixed way that literary productions have of talking about the author of the *Primero Sueño*. Working with Mónica Zagal's *La venganza de Sor Juana* (2007), José Luis Gómez's *El beso de la virreina* (2008), Mónica Lavín's *Yo la peor* (2009), and Kyra Galván's *Los indecibles pecados de Sor Juana* (2010), the reasons behind the selection are clarified by Estrada when he notices that these novels "pluralize our conceptions of Sor Juana as they demonstrate that historical truth is fragmented and dispersed, that memory elaborates and intertextualizes its own palimpsests, and that our relationship with the past is never neutral" (63). Following the same structure, he uses subchapters to delve into the exploration of this persistence, first of which is the Manichean question regarding appearance when representing this character. The presence or absence of beauty in Sor Juana is a main focus for most of the products analyzed along the chapter, which according to the author evidences the commodification not only of the nun but also of any female character that has to be assessed in terms of aesthetic value. Moreover, this polarization of the character "exhibits the well-known tendency to

reduce and homogenize a woman's life to make it fit within a polarized scheme of male domination and female subordination" (67). This misrepresentation that Estrada finds in the question of Sor Juana's beauty is emphasized by a fixation on the nun's sexuality throughout the novels that he analyzes. This oversexualization is "expected within a neoliberal environment whose sexual politics promote individual transgressions and actively reward explorations of the inner self. Evidently, the authors who expose Sor Juana's sexuality today intentionally want to disturb her respected figure to humanize her, drawing from her own historical context" (74). While also reviewing the feminist and domestic side of these different deployments of the icon, Estrada addresses the multiplicity of elements that constitute this contemporary notion of Sor Juana, while being critical of how this inserts her in a neoliberal logic of commodification.

In Chapter Three, "Leona Vicario. The Sweet Mother of the Nation" (100-139), Estrada begins by recuperating the work of writer Genaro García who, in 1910 published a biography about this protagonist from the Independence, to set the trace of how Mexican literature has thought and represented this character. He goes on to say that "Leona Vicario is the courageous mother who gave birth to her first child in a cave in 1817, lacking food and proper medical care; she is the honorable wife of Quintana Roo; and last but not least, she is the mother of Mexican Independence" (103). It is a figure who represents the subversion of certain patriarchal paradigms that lay as the background for her story. He then revisits some of the criticism that the famous feminist Rosario Castellanos made about Vicario. She denounced "women's marginality in a world that keeps them away from the production of knowledge" (106). Estrada follows these representations of the character noting that in 2010, with the celebrations of the bicentennial of Independence, there were a series of novels that had her as the main subject: Carlos Pascual's *La insurgenta*, Celia del Palacio's *Leona*, and Eugenio Aguirre's *Leona Vicario: La insurgente*. Through the analysis of these oeuvres, Estrada aims to prove how, even though they do recuperate the multifaceted aspects of Vicario's life, they still ascribe her to a role of mother and loving wife, a woman whose political actions are inevitably intertwined with her affects and emotions. Moreover, "this fictional display of Leona's romantic portrayal speaks for the impossibility of alternative histories of women's empowerment" (107) and, as a consequence, it demonstrates how the neoliberal logics of the literary market are directly related to the types of representation women get in contemporary Mexican literature.

From one revolutionary woman to the women who participated in the first big armed movement of twentieth-century Mexico, Chapter Four, "Si Adelita se fuera con otro… Soldaderas of An Unfinished Revolution" (140-183) examines the topical figures of the *soldaderas*. He starts by

questioning the pejorative attitude that has been common trade when addressing these Revolutionary figures by going through the works of prominent authors from the "Novela de la Revolución" genre: Mariano Azuela, Martín Luis Guzmán, Rafael F. Muñoz and Francisco González Rojas, among others. While reviewing the way these literary works depict the soldaderas in their narratives, and by mentioning as well the works of Campobello and Poniatowska in a better light than their compatriots, Estrada notices that in the end in the portrayal of these women "they return to a state of invisibility, domesticity, and conformism, as if their literary representation was not capable of overcoming their real historical impediments or the hegemonic forces that even today relegate women and other minorities to the outskirts of power" (144). Estrada argues that given these uneven power dynamics, these historical figures "are still fighting an unfinished gender battle in today's literature" (145), trying to fight against the stereotypical representation they usually have. By analyzing the works of Rosa Helia Villa (*Los amantes de mi general*, 1999), Paco Ignacio Taibo II (*Pancho Villa*, 2006), Pablo Ángel Palou (*Zapata*, 2006; *No me dejen morir así*, 2014), Elena Poniatowska (*Las soldaderas*, 1999), Cristina Rivera Garza (*Nadie me verá llorar*, 1999), Estela Leñero (*Soles en la sombra: Mujeres en la Revolución*, 2011), Monica Lavín (*Las rebeldes*, 2011) and Fernando Zamora (*Por debajo del agua*, 2001), Estrada manages to create a dialogue between diverse forms of literature about the participation that these female characters had in the Revolution. Even though he comes to a kind of bitter-sweet conclusion, stating that "they are waiting for somebody to take interest in their inner selves, their brief moments of empowerment, their victimization and historical invisibility" (183), it is evident that this essay represents a step forward in that direction.

To end on a high note, Estrada chooses Frida Kahlo as his last subject matter in the Epilogue: "Espero alegre la salida. Frida Kahlo and the Never-Ending Torments of a Female Icon" (184-208). By analyzing the works of three of Mexico's greatest writers (Carlos Fuentes, Elena Poniatowska and Carlos Monsiváis), along with the productions of F. G. Haghenbeck, Margo Glantz, Ana Clavel, Monica Lavín, the author thinks of Frida as a symbol which still reflects the anxieties that the other iconic women in the book carry as well. "What we see in most contemporary rearticulations of Frida's life rearticulations that activate an already existing work of art like one of Frida's paintings, a page of her diary, or even her overall everyday performance- is that the completed work 'resembles a mosaic where each piece retains its own face and character' (Lévi-Strauss 7)" (187). While embracing the impossibility of being completely understood that this figure carries in itself, Estrada shows the different ways her utterances are in direct dialogue with the portrayal of the other women in his book. This comes to show how female representation in contemporary Mexican literature is somehow

supported by the neoliberal market demands. The book inscribes itself in the contemporary debates of gender and genre in Mexican literature, especially in the relationship between neoliberal policies and the market logics that regulate the deployment of these cultural artifacts, particularly when women are involved as the main subjects.

In dialogue with the important contributions from Jean Franco in *Las Conspiradoras* or Emily Hind in her research regarding Mexican female intellectuals in the context of female representation and the deployment of the personas these icons have had, Estrada is interested in understanding how these economic tendencies have repercussions in the ways we address female characters, "how contemporary literature responds to the feminist denouncement of women's marginal state and historical invisibility" (7). This also clarifies why he preferred these iconic women over others: the amount of cultural productions that appeared at the dawn of the new millennium which have them as protagonists is in itself a stimulating symptom. Through the selection of the materials that constitute his main corpus, Estrada also engages with the discussion about "high" and "low" culture. As he phrases it: "Even bestsellers produced for fast and easy consumption project the anxieties of a community at a given historical time, regardless of their literary quality, superficiality, ephemeral reception" (5). While being clear about some of his preferences, when delving into the analysis of the novels and plays, the ubiquitous presence throughout the book of different types of literary products, encompassing the entirety of the high-low culture spectrum, the selection itself works as an invitation to read and get in touch with a variety of contemporary productions that could otherwise be missed by academic researchers. In this regard, it is a book that Mexicanists and all researchers alike can enjoy and use as the starting point to the very pressing conversations that Estrada poses about gender and literature in the new century.