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Orientaciones transpacíficas: La modernidad mexicana y el espectro de Asia

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**Torres-Rodríguez, Laura. *Orientaciones transpacíficas: La modernidad mexicana y el espectro de Asia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Paperback. 262 pp.**

Laura Torres-Rodríguez's study *Orientaciones transpacíficas: La modernidad mexicana y el espectro de Asia* is a brilliant, interdisciplinary book that rewrites intellectual Mexican history by addressing, in innovative ways, Trans-Pacific (as opposed to the traditional Trans-Atlantic) cultural exchanges between Mexico and the Asian continent. Torres-Rodríguez traces the works of central figures in Mexican cultural tradition who were intellectually formed under Atlantic and Occidentalist premises, but suddenly turn their gaze to Asia, opting instead for a Trans-Pacific orientation. According to the author, this creates a relationship considered *éxtima*, that is, an unexpected feeling of intimacy, familiarity, or proximity with something that is still perceived as being far away both culturally and geographically. In the opening chapter, as in the rest of the book, the author demonstrates how the far-away culture of "the Orient" is appropriated as something intimate and national, as an "internal exteriority" or *extimidad* in Torres-Rodríguez's words. At the same time, the appearance of the Pacific Ocean in the intellectual horizon of Mexico produces a feeling of "invagination," that is a division, a loss of received contours, an interior side that becomes the effect of a division. It is an external border that conceptually folds toward the inside, forming a relation of continuity. As a result, that which seemed peripheral (Asian cultures) suddenly becomes central to Mexican modernity.

Torres-Rodríguez looks at how Mexican intelligentsia found in Orientalism and in their study of the modernization of Asian countries (particularly Japan and India) a way

to conceive of a different path for their country's modernity. At the same time, they found new ways of classifying local population and establishing social hierarchies through racialized discourses imported from Asia. In this book, Torres-Rodríguez returns to the critique of Orientalism as a way to study today's globalization and the neoliberal resurgence of a White supremacist official discourse of rejection of migrants in the US, where Mexico has become the new, closer Orient. She concludes that that Mexican Orientalism, bypassing European or US influence and coloniality, articulated its own cultural hegemony and centrality.

The first two chapters explore the 1900-1925 period, with the Mexican Revolution at the center of later debates about nationalism. Chapter 1 focuses on the *modernista* José Juan Tablada, who found inspiration, during the years of the Mexican Revolution, in Japanese material culture and aesthetics, using this new knowledge to re-interpret Mexican indigenous crafts. Through this approach, he provided a positive assessment of contemporary indigenous crafts stemming from visualizations of national landscapes inspired by *modernista* studies of Japanese *ukiyo-é*. Tablada inherits the Japonism from *Modernista* aesthetics and from the Porfiriato's attempt at emulating the conservative modernization that characterized the Meiji Restoration. In this chapter, the aforementioned *extimidad*, a new way of perceiving Japan and of seeing Mexico through Japan, privileges material culture and the perception of visuality, as is evident in Tablada's chronicles included in *En el país del sol*, in his book *Hiorshigué*, and in the photographs of his home's interior spaces.

The second chapter, perhaps the most innovative and eye-opening one in the book, demonstrates how José Vasconcelos's interpretation of Bengali religious discourse

and its racial subtexts became the basis for his own controversial discourse of *mestizaje* in *La raza cósmica*. Therefore, instead of Europe, it is Indian nationalism on its way toward decolonization that serves as a model for Mexico's own aspirations for global development and modernity via the process of *mestizaje*. This approach counters Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, once it moves to Mexico, as a profoundly Eurocentric discourse. Indeed, Latin American debates about economic, sociocultural, and racial heterogeneity within the nation found in Asia a mirror in which to look for its own reflection. Through the example of Asia, Latin American intellectuals elaborate on the existence of different and simultaneous modes of economic production, theorizing as well about the coexistence of different historical temporalities. Vasconcelos's textual relation with India (both Indian writing and texts about India) is indicative of the way in which colonial India replaced Japan as a modern of trans-Pacific research during the 1920s, the first years of the revolutionary regime. Torres-Rodríguez astutely argues that Vasconcelos's book *Estudios indostánicos*, where one can find his reading of Bengali thinkers and European orientalists, should be considered the main source and the ideological basis for his most famous work, *La raza cósmica*. Indian cultural discourse, therefore, took a predominant position in Latin American critical discourse about Modernity as well as in discussions about cultural, racial, temporal, and economic mixing. In Mexican trans-Pacific thought, Asia became a source of artistic and aesthetic inspiration, as well as a model for the cultural representation of racial heterogeneity. During the 1920s, this trans-Pacific perspective provided support for seeing social and racial heterogeneity as an obstacle that had to be overcome through race mixing and as a path to modernity. In fact, the Orient in itself becomes the path to modernity. Therefore,

these first two chapters show how Tablada and Vasconcelos used a trans-Pacific intellectual orientation to carry out intercultural research that would support the consolidation of a culturally and aesthetically exceptionalist national discourse.

Whereas these first two chapters of Torres-Rodríguez's book deal with the first decades of the twentieth century, when racial hybridization and aesthetic transculturation inspired by the study of "the Orient" influenced nationalist and populist ideologies, the following two switch to the last decade of the 1960s, when the Orient becomes, once again, the model of analysis in discussions about socioeconomic heterogeneity in Mexico. In the context of state militarization and repression, Karl Marx's concept of the Asian Mode of Production becomes a tool to describe the PRI government as an Oriental State reminiscent of those of China and the Soviet Union. Chapter 3 analyzes Roger Bartra's essays and, in particular, his early study of the Asian Mode of Production as a critical way to explain the nationalistic political and economic consolidation of the Mexican state. As Torres Rodríguez explains, for Marx, the coexistence of more than one mode of production in one society (as happened in some Asian countries) produced temporal stagnation. Therefore, Bartra establishes a theoretical continuity, in terms of temporality—as a mode of orientation and aesthetic perception—between Asia and Latin America. During the 1970s, there is a debate about the Oriental character of Mexican modernity through the discursive adoption of the Asian Mode of Production (with echoes of the old Oriental despotism) in order to link exceptionalist nationalism with state authoritarianism.

In turn, the fourth chapter exposes, in the novel of the 1960s, the perception of the Orient as a specter from the past that stalks post-revolutionary discourse. The global

affects of the Cold War and film noir aesthetics influenced Mexican fiction, where the topic of suspicion of political infiltration became pervasive. Thus, Rafael Bernal's novel *El complot mongol* first deals with the Chinese diaspora and the Chinatown in Mexico City only to end up exposing the PRI state's mechanisms of repression as well as Western interventionism during the Cold War. Following both the parameters of US hardboiled and real life in Mexico, the Chinatown in the novel becomes an internal border where Chinese Mexicans and Maoist militants are persecuted by a progressively militarized Mexican state. In other words, post-revolutionary anti-Chinese hysteria returns during the 1970s. The Chinatown evokes the persecution of Maoist militants during the 1960s and how Cold War politics affected the daily life of the Chinese diaspora in Mexico, bringing back echoes of 1930s Sinophobic campaigns. The PRI then becomes a sort of Oriental, despotic ancient regime through the apparition of the specter of China and of a Maoist conspiracy. The government tries to hide its own repressive and biopolitical mechanisms behind xenophobic, anti-militant, misogynous, and anti-drug politics. This, argues Torres-Rodríguez, is the Oriental part of *El complot mongol*, rather than the Chinese migrant community.

Torres-Rodríguez therefore argues that the twentieth-century experience of Modernity in Mexico is "Oriental," all the while placing Mexico, as a crossroads between North American, Latin America and the Caribbean, at the center of debates about Modernity. Already during the viceroyalty of New Spain, Mexico was a global referent in the birth of a new network of world trade routes that would link America, Asia, and Europe through the ports of Veracruz, Acapulco, and Manila. Then, the first great revolution of the twentieth century, the Mexican Revolution, once again placed Mexico at

the center stage of new world social processes. As Torres-Rodríguez puts it, “Mexican nationalism became one of the most effective modern projects in the continent and one of the indisputable centers of Americanism.”

The last chapter concludes with an exploration of post-NAFTA orientalist imagination after the so-called democratic transition in 2000, when the liberal Japan so admired by the Porfiriato and Asian hypermoderniy returned to the Mexican neoliberal imagination, in part because of the presence of Japanese businesses in Mexican sweatshops and mines in inner Mexico and the northern border. Torres-Rodríguez finally argues that recent trade agreements such as the TPP confirm the transpacific geopolitical orientation of Mexico, particularly considering the possible end of NAFTA under Trump’s government and its xenophobic and protectionist rhetoric against China, Japan, and Mexico.

Overall, this is an extraordinary piece of scholarship that opens new paths in Mexican and Trans-Pacific studies. If I had one small quibble with this impressive scholarly study, it would be that although the authors and texts selected for study are well justified, I would’ve loved to see the inclusion of female voices, if there are any relevant ones.

**IGNACIO LÓPEZ-CALVO**  
*University of California, Merced*

**From:** Martinez, Michael L <michael.martinez@mnstate.edu>  
**Sent:** Friday, June 21, 2019 3:25 AM  
**To:** Ignacio Lopezcalvo  
**Subject:** Re: Romance Quarterly - Book Review

Hola, Ignacio,

Yes, it has been accepted for publication, though when exactly it will come out depends on page counts that I can't know until a later date. Also, the review is subject to some slight editorial modification by our team of editors.

Please let me know if you need further clarification.

Saludos,

M